



# HEARTLAND -TABLE-

Grandma's  
Beef Stew

Grandma's Beef Stew  
1951  
Aunt Helen & I made  
this for the first time  
for the boys  
in the house

# About This Cookbook

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Welcome to *The Heartland Table*, a celebration of the honest, comforting flavors that have nourished families across America's Midwest for generations. This collection brings together 89 beloved recipes—from church basement potlucks to family Sunday dinners—that capture the warmth, ingenuity, and community spirit of the heartland.

These aren't fancy recipes. They're the ones scrawled on index cards, passed down through generations, and tweaked with love in kitchens from Minnesota to Missouri. They're the casseroles that show up at every gathering, the desserts that disappear first, and the comfort foods that say "home" no matter where you've wandered.

You'll find classics like hotdish and funeral potatoes alongside regional favorites like Chicago-style hot dogs and Detroit coney dogs. There are breads baked with patience, preserves made in summer's abundance, and sweets that turn any occasion into a celebration. Each recipe has been tested,

retested, and refined to work in real home kitchens with real families.

More than just recipes, this cookbook preserves the stories and traditions that make Midwestern cooking special: the unspoken rules of potluck etiquette, the fierce debates over what counts as a "hotdish," and the creative measurements that only make sense to those who learned to cook at Grandma's elbow.

Whether you grew up in the heartland or are discovering its culinary traditions for the first time, these recipes invite you to experience the generosity, practicality, and deep sense of community that define Midwestern cooking. They're meant to be shared, adapted, and made your own—just as they've always been.

Pull up a chair. There's always room for one more at the Heartland Table.

***Michael F. Schecht***

*Special Contributions by Stephan L. Openclaw*

*AX-Platform and the Flavor Atlas Team*

# Table of Contents

## Breakfast & Brunch

---

Amish Baked Oatmeal .....
Biscuits and Sausage Gravy .....
Buttermilk Pancakes with Pure Maple Syrup .....
Dutch Baby Pancake .....
Farmhouse Skillet Hash with Fried Eggs .....
Midwestern Breakfast Casserole (Sausage & Egg) .....
Monkey Bread .....
Sausage Egg Breakfast Burritos .....

## Appetizers

---

Beer-Battered Fried Pickles .....
Classic Deviled Eggs .....
Pimento Cheese Spread .....
Spinach Artichoke Dip .....
Wisconsin Fried Cheese Curds .....

## Soups & Stews

---

Booyah (Community Stew) .....
Cincinnati Chili .....
Corn Chowder .....
Cream of Tomato Soup .....
Hearty Chicken Noodle Soup .....
Loaded Baked Potato Soup .....

Minnesota Wild Rice Soup .....  
Wisconsin Beer Cheese Soup .....

## **Mains**

---

American Goulash .....  
Bratwurst with Sauerkraut .....  
Chicago Deep Dish Pizza .....  
Chicago Italian Beef .....  
Chicago-Style Hot Dog .....  
Chicken and Dumplings .....  
Chicken Fried Steak .....  
Country Fried Chicken .....  
Country Meatloaf .....  
Detroit-Style Coney Dogs .....  
Detroit-Style Pizza .....  
Indiana Breaded Pork Tenderloin Sandwich .....  
Iowa Breaded Pork Chop .....  
Kansas City BBQ Brisket & Burnt Ends .....  
Loose Meat Sandwich (Maid-Rite / Tavern Burger) .....  
Michigan Cherry-Glazed Ham .....  
Nebraska Runza (Beef & Cabbage Sandwich) .....  
Pan-Fried Walleye with Tartar Sauce .....  
Pierogi .....  
Pork Chops and Applesauce .....  
Shepherd's Pie (Midwest Cottage Pie) .....  
Sloppy Joes .....  
St. Louis Toasted Ravioli .....  
Swedish Meatballs .....  
Tater Tot Hotdish .....

Wisconsin Friday Fish Fry .....

## Sides

---

Baked Beans .....

Cheesy Funeral Potatoes .....

Classic Potato Salad .....

Creamed Corn .....

Creamy Coleslaw .....

Green Bean Casserole .....

Mac and Cheese .....

Butter & Salt Corn on the Cob .....

Scalloped Potatoes .....

Sweet Potato Casserole .....

## Breads & Baked Goods

---

Banana Bread .....

Beer Bread .....

Cinnamon Rolls with Cream Cheese Frosting .....

Dinner Rolls .....

Lefse .....

Skillet Cornbread .....

## Desserts

---

Bread Pudding with Bourbon Sauce .....

Buckeye Candies .....

Classic Apple Pie (with Optional Cheddar Crust) .....

Frosted Sugar Cookies .....

German Chocolate Cake .....

Iowa State Fair Funnel Cake .....  
Michigan Cherry Pie .....  
Rhubarb Crisp with Oat Topping .....  
Scotcheroos .....  
Snickerdoodles .....  
Sugar Cream Pie .....

## **Snacks & Confections**

---

Cheese and Sausage Board .....  
Classic Popcorn Balls .....  
Peanut Brittle .....  
Puppy Chow (Muddy Buddies) .....

## **Drinks**

---

Homemade Lemonade .....  
Homemade Root Beer .....  
Hot Apple Cider .....  
Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned .....

## **Preserves & Pickles**

---

Apple Butter .....  
Corn Relish .....  
Fresh Giardiniera (Chicago-Style Hot) .....  
Homemade Dill Pickles .....  
Pickled Beets .....  
Strawberry Freezer Jam .....

# **Breakfast & Brunch**



# Amish Baked Oatmeal

*Ohio & Indiana Amish Country*

*A warm, custard-like breakfast casserole that's been a staple in Amish and Mennonite communities for generations. Think of it as oatmeal's more sophisticated, oven-baked cousin.*

## Ingredients

- 3 cups old-fashioned rolled oats
- 1 cup packed brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup whole milk
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- ½ cup raisins or dried cranberries (optional)
- Fresh berries, maple syrup, or cream for serving

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat** oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 9×13-inch baking dish.
- 2 **Combine dry ingredients:** In a large bowl, mix oats, brown sugar, baking powder, cinnamon, and salt.
- 3 **Combine wet ingredients:** In a separate bowl, whisk together milk, melted butter, eggs, and vanilla.
- 4 **Mix:** Pour wet ingredients into dry and stir until just combined. Fold in raisins or cranberries if using.
- 5 **Pour** mixture into prepared baking dish and spread evenly.
- 6 **Bake** for 35–40 minutes until golden brown on top and set in the center.
- 7 **Serve** warm with fresh berries, a drizzle of maple syrup, or a splash of cold cream.

## At A Glance

Servings	8–10
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	35–40 minutes
Total Time	45–50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast & Brunch

## Tips & Variations

- Make-ahead: Assemble the night before, cover, and refrigerate. Add 5 minutes to bake time.
- Apple-cinnamon version: Add 1 diced apple and increase cinnamon to 1½ teaspoons.
- Nut lovers: Stir in ½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans.
- Leftovers: Reheat individual portions in the microwave with a splash of milk.

## Did You Know?

Baked oatmeal is a cornerstone of Amish "church lunch" — the communal meal served after Sunday worship. In many Amish communities, families take turns hosting, and baked oatmeal can be made in large batches with minimal fuss, making it the perfect dish for feeding 30+ people in a farmhouse kitchen. The recipe has barely changed in over a century.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — served in a stoneware baking dish on a worn wooden table, with a small pitcher of cream and scattered berries. Morning window light.\*



# Biscuits and Sausage Gravy

*Midwest US*

*A quintessential hearty breakfast, flaky biscuits smothered in a rich, creamy sausage gravy—a true taste of comfort and a staple of Midwestern mornings.*

## Ingredients

- For the Biscuits:
  - 2 cups (240g) all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
  - 1 tsp baking powder
  - ½ tsp baking soda
  - ½ tsp salt
  - ½ cup (113g) cold unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
  - ¾ cup (180ml) cold buttermilk, plus more for brushing
- For the Sausage Gravy:
  - 1 lb (450g) bulk breakfast sausage (pork recommended)
  - ¼ cup (60g) all-purpose flour
  - 3 cups (720ml) milk (whole or 2%), warmed
  - ½ tsp black pepper
  - Salt to taste
  - Pinch of cayenne pepper (optional, for a subtle kick)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare Biscuits:** Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). In a large bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Cut in the cold butter with a pastry blender or your fingertips until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Gradually add buttermilk, stirring with a fork until a shaggy dough forms.
- 2 **Form Biscuits:** Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Gently knead 5-6 times until it just comes together. Pat or roll dough to about ¾-inch thickness. Use a 2.5-inch (6 cm) biscuit cutter to cut out biscuits. Reroll scraps once. Place biscuits on an ungreased baking sheet, close together for softer sides or slightly apart for crispier sides. Brush tops with extra buttermilk.
- 3 **Bake Biscuits:** Bake for 12-15 minutes, or until golden brown and puffed.
- 4 **Cook Sausage:** While biscuits bake, crumble breakfast sausage into a large skillet over medium-high heat. Cook, breaking up with a spoon, until browned and cooked through. Do not drain all the fat; leave about ¼ cup of drippings in the pan for the gravy.
- 5 **Make Roux for Gravy:** Reduce heat to medium. Sprinkle flour over the cooked sausage and drippings. Cook, stirring constantly, for 1-2 minutes until a light golden roux forms.
- 6 **Add Milk & Thicken:** Slowly whisk in the warmed milk, stirring constantly to prevent lumps. Bring to a simmer, whisking frequently, until the gravy thickens to your desired consistency (about 5-7 minutes).
- 7 **Season Gravy:** Stir in black pepper and cayenne pepper (if using). Taste and season with salt as needed (sausage can be salty). Keep warm over low heat.
- 8 **Serve:** Split warm biscuits in half and generously spoon the hot sausage gravy over them. Serve immediately.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	25-30 minutes
Total Time	45-50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

- For a richer gravy, use half-and-half or heavy cream instead of milk.
- Add a pinch of dried sage or thyme to the gravy for extra savory flavor.
- Make ahead: The biscuit dough can be prepared and cut, then frozen on a baking sheet. Once frozen, transfer to a freezer bag and bake from frozen, adding a few extra minutes to the baking time. Gravy reheats well on the stovetop with a splash of milk if needed.
- Serve with a side of scrambled eggs or fried potatoes for a complete breakfast.

## Did You Know?

> Biscuits and Sausage Gravy is a beloved Southern and Midwestern comfort food, providing a hearty, affordable, and incredibly satisfying start to the day. Its popularity in the Midwest, especially in rural communities, stems from its ability to feed hungry families with simple, readily available ingredients. Often served after church services or during family gatherings, it embodies the generous spirit of Midwestern hospitality.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A stack of golden-brown, flaky biscuits split open, drenched in thick, creamy sausage gravy, served on a classic white diner plate. A sprig of fresh parsley for garnish. The plate sits on a well-worn wooden table, with soft, natural morning light. A steaming mug of coffee in the background, slightly out of focus.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will make a double batch for breakfast and insist you take home the leftovers, even if you politely decline.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A crisp Saturday morning, the smell of fresh coffee brewing, and a lively conversation with family around the kitchen table.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Biscuits And Sausage Gravy**

> "Grandma Helen always added a tiny pinch of sugar (about a teaspoon) to her gravy. 'It balances the savory just right,' she'd wink, 'and makes it so smooth, everyone always asks for my recipe!'"



# Buttermilk Pancakes with Pure Maple Syrup

*Midwest — From Every Kitchen*

*Tall, fluffy, and golden-edged — these are the pancakes that turn Saturday mornings into family traditions across the heartland, where real maple syrup flows from Michigan and Wisconsin sugar bushes.*

## Ingredients

- Dry Ingredients
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- Wet Ingredients
- 2 cups buttermilk, at room temperature
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, melted and slightly cooled
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- For Serving
- Pure maple syrup (Grade A Dark Amber recommended), warmed
- Additional butter pats
- Fresh berries or sliced bananas (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Mix the dry ingredients.** In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
- 2 **Combine the wet ingredients.** In a separate bowl, whisk the buttermilk, eggs, melted butter, and vanilla until smooth.
- 3 **Make the batter.** Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients and stir gently with a rubber spatula until \*just\* combined. The batter should be lumpy — overmixing is the enemy of fluffy pancakes. A few streaks of flour are perfectly fine. Let the batter rest 5 minutes while the griddle heats.
- 4 **Heat the griddle.** Heat a cast iron griddle or large nonstick skillet over medium heat (350°F if using an electric griddle). Lightly grease with butter or a neutral oil.
- 5 **Test the heat.** Flick a few drops of water onto the surface — they should dance and sizzle immediately, then evaporate within a second or two.
- 6 **Cook the pancakes.** Pour ½ cup batter per pancake onto the griddle. Cook until the surface is covered in bubbles and the edges look set and slightly dry, about 2–3 minutes. Flip once and cook until golden brown on the underside, about 1–2 minutes more.
- 7 **Keep warm.** Transfer finished pancakes to a wire rack set on a baking sheet in a 200°F oven while you cook the remaining batches.
- 8 **Serve immediately** with warm pure maple syrup, a generous pat of butter, and your favorite toppings.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4 (about 12 pancakes)
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	20 minutes
Total Time	30 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

- The Lumpy Batter Secret: Resist the urge to stir until smooth. Those lumps create pockets of air that make pancakes fluffy.
- Blueberry Pancakes: Scatter a handful of fresh blueberries onto each pancake right after pouring the batter on the griddle. Don't fold them into the batter — they'll turn everything purple.
- Chocolate Chip: Add ¼ cup mini chocolate chips to the batter for a kid-favorite twist.
- Cornmeal Crunch: Replace ½ cup of the flour with fine cornmeal for a heartier, slightly crunchy texture — very Midwestern.
- No buttermilk? Stir 2 tablespoons white vinegar or lemon juice into 2 cups regular milk. Let it sit 5 minutes until slightly thickened.
- Freeze extras: Cool completely, then freeze in a single layer. Reheat in the toaster for weekday breakfasts.

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### **Did You Know?**

> The Midwest produces more maple syrup than you might think. Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota all have thriving sugar bush operations, and the Great Lakes maple season — typically March through early April — is a cherished annual tradition. Families tap sugar maples when nighttime temperatures drop below freezing but daytime temps rise above, creating the pressure that pushes sap upward. It takes roughly 40 gallons of sap to produce just one gallon of pure maple syrup, making every golden drop a small miracle of patience and craft.

\* Photography note: Stack of three pancakes on a blue-rimmed enamelware plate, butter melting on top, maple syrup mid-pour from a small ceramic pitcher. Soft morning window light from the left. Scattered blueberries and a checkered cloth napkin. Warm, homey, inviting.\*



# Dutch Baby Pancake

*Midwest — The Sunday Morning Showstopper*

*Part pancake, part popover, all drama. This puffy, golden beauty billows up in the oven like a golden cloud, its edges reaching for the sky while the center stays custardy and tender. Dust it with powdered sugar, squeeze fresh lemon over the top, and listen to your family gasp as you bring it to the table.*

## Ingredients

- The Batter
- 4 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1 cup whole milk, at room temperature
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- For the Pan
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- For Serving
- Powdered sugar, for dusting
- 1 fresh lemon, cut into wedges
- Fresh berries (optional)
- Pure maple syrup (optional)
- Whipped cream (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Position the rack and preheat.** Place an oven rack in the lower third of the oven. Put a 12-inch cast iron skillet (or oven-safe skillet) in the oven. Preheat to 425°F. Let the skillet heat for at least 15 minutes.
- 2 **Make the batter.** While the oven preheats, add eggs to a blender. Blend on high for 1 minute until light and frothy. Add milk, flour, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt. Blend for 30 seconds until completely smooth. (No blender? Whisk vigorously in a bowl until smooth with no lumps.)
- 3 **Prep the pan.** Carefully remove the screaming-hot skillet from the oven. Add butter — it will sizzle and foam immediately. Swirl to coat the bottom and sides completely.
- 4 **Pour and bake.** Immediately pour the batter into the center of the hot, buttery skillet. Don't stir or spread — just pour. Return to the oven immediately.
- 5 **Bake without peeking.** Bake for 20–25 minutes until the dutch baby has puffed dramatically, the edges are deeply golden brown, and the center is set but still slightly custardy. Do not open the oven door during baking — this can cause it to deflate.
- 6 **Serve immediately.** Remove from oven — it will begin to deflate within minutes (this is normal and expected). Dust generously with powdered sugar, squeeze lemon juice over the top, and serve with your choice of toppings.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4–6
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

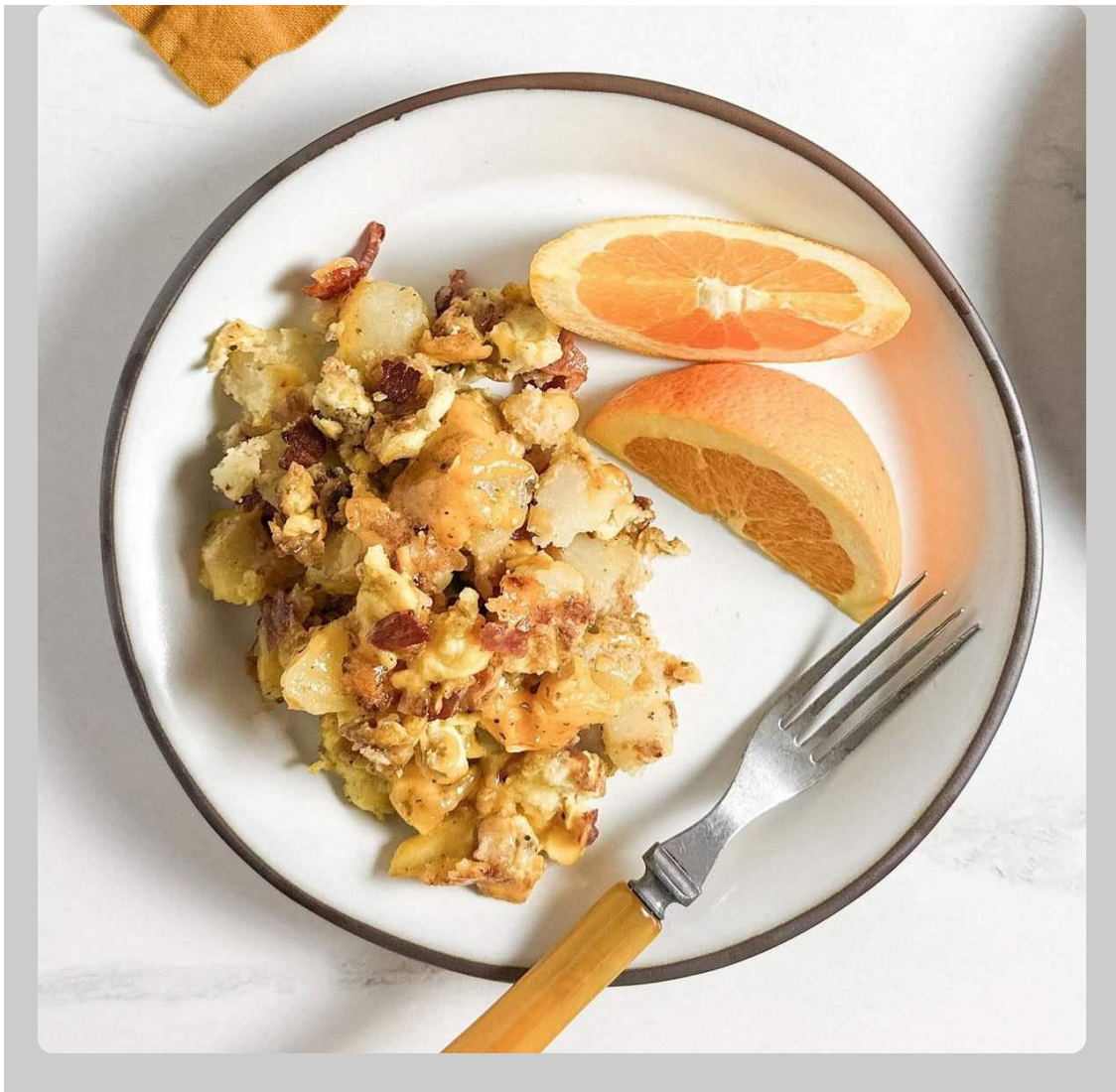
- Room Temperature Is Key: Cold eggs and milk won't give you the same dramatic puff. Let them sit out for 30 minutes, or warm the milk gently.
- Hot Pan, Cold Batter: The contrast between the hot butter and cold batter creates steam, which creates the puff. Don't skip preheating the pan.
- Cast Iron is Best: The heat retention of cast iron gives the best rise. A well-seasoned pan also releases easily.
- Apple Dutch Baby: Sauté 2 sliced apples with 2 tablespoons butter, ¼ cup brown sugar, and cinnamon in the skillet first. Pour batter over the apples.
- Savory Version: Omit sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Add ¼ cup shredded cheese and fresh herbs. Serve with bacon and eggs.
- Berry Topping: Warm mixed berries with a splash of maple syrup for a compote.
- Smaller Portions: Make individual dutch babies in 6-inch skillets — reduce bake time to 15–18 minutes.

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### Did You Know?

> Despite its name, the Dutch Baby isn't Dutch at all — it's German. The dish originated in Seattle in the early 1900s at Manca's Cafe, where owner Victor Manca served a version of the German *apfelpannkuchen* (apple pancake). The story goes that his young daughter couldn't pronounce "Deutsch" (German) and called it "Dutch" instead. The name stuck. The dish migrated to the Midwest with German immigrants and became a beloved Sunday morning tradition, especially in Wisconsin and Minnesota's German communities. It's the kind of recipe that makes the cook look like a genius while requiring almost no effort — the best kind of Heartland cooking.

\* Photography note: 12-inch cast iron skillet holding a dramatically puffed Dutch baby pancake, edges reaching upward, center golden and set. Generous dusting of powdered sugar. Lemon wedges alongside. Fresh berries scattered. Morning light streaming through a kitchen window. Rustic wooden table.\*



## Farmhouse Skillet Hash with Fried Eggs

*Midwest — Farm Country*

*The farmhouse breakfast that fueled a century of early mornings: crispy-edged potatoes, savory pork, and sweet bell peppers all married in a single cast iron skillet, crowned with sunny fried eggs whose runny yolks become the richest sauce you'll ever make.*

## Ingredients

- The Hash
- 1½ pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, cut into ½-inch dice (no need to peel)
- 8 ounces breakfast sausage (bulk) or thick-cut bacon, chopped
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves (or 1 teaspoon dried)
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Salt to taste
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- The Eggs
- 4 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- For Serving
- Fresh chives or green onions, sliced
- Hot sauce (optional)
- Buttered toast

## Instructions

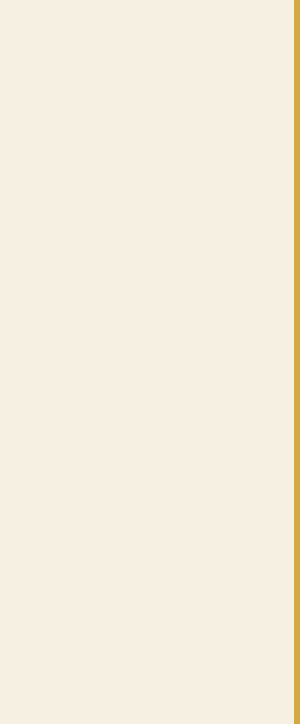
- 1 **Par-cook the potatoes.** Place the diced potatoes in a pot of cold, salted water. Bring to a boil and cook for 5–6 minutes, until just barely fork-tender — they should still have some firmness. Drain thoroughly and spread on a clean towel to dry. (Dry potatoes = crispy potatoes.)
- 2 **Cook the meat.** In a large cast iron skillet (12-inch preferred), cook the sausage or bacon over medium-high heat, breaking the sausage into crumbles, until browned and the fat is rendered, about 5–6 minutes. Remove the meat with a slotted spoon, leaving the drippings in the pan.
- 3 **Crisp the potatoes.** Add the butter and oil to the drippings in the skillet. Once the butter is foaming, add the par-cooked potatoes in a single layer. Let them cook undisturbed for 3–4 minutes until a golden crust forms on the bottom. Toss, then let them crisp again for another 3–4 minutes. Repeat until the potatoes are golden and crispy on most sides, about 10–12 minutes total.
- 4 **Add the vegetables.** Push the potatoes to the edges and add the onion and bell peppers to the center of the skillet. Cook for 3–4 minutes until the peppers soften slightly. Add the garlic and cook 30 seconds until fragrant.
- 5 **Combine and season.** Return the cooked sausage or bacon to the skillet. Toss everything together. Sprinkle with thyme, smoked paprika, and black pepper. Season with salt to taste. Toss gently and cook another 2 minutes to let the flavors meld. Reduce heat to low to keep warm.
- 6 **Fry the eggs.** In a separate nonstick skillet, melt the butter over medium-low heat. Crack the eggs gently into the pan, season with salt and pepper, and cook until the whites are set but the yolks are still runny, about 3–4 minutes. (For over-easy, flip gently and cook 30 seconds more.)
- 7 **Serve.** Divide the hash among plates (or serve straight from the skillet — the Midwestern way). Nestle the fried eggs on top. Garnish with fresh chives. Serve with hot sauce and buttered toast.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes
Total Time	45 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

- **Cast Iron is Key:** The heat retention and surface of a well-seasoned cast iron skillet gives hash its signature crispy edges. Don't use a thin pan — you won't get the same crust.
- **Potato Swap:** Sweet potatoes work beautifully for a slightly sweeter, more colorful hash. Or mix half regular, half sweet.
- **Corned Beef Hash:** Substitute 12 ounces of chopped leftover corned beef for the sausage for a classic diner-style variation.
- **Make It Veggie:** Skip the meat entirely and add mushrooms, zucchini, and an extra pepper. The cast iron will still give you great crispy edges.

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- Leftover Friendly: Hash is the ultimate "clean out the fridge" recipe. Last night's roasted vegetables, leftover steak, or extra ham all belong here.
  - Cheese Addition: Sprinkle shredded cheddar or Pepper Jack over the hash during the last minute of cooking for melty goodness.
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### **Did You Know?**

> Hash — from the French *\*hacher\**, meaning "to chop" — has been a staple of American farmhouse cooking since the colonial era, but it became a Midwestern breakfast institution in the 19th century when immigrant farmers needed a single-skillet meal that could fuel a full morning of work before the sun was fully up. The beauty of hash is its democracy: whatever meat was left over from last night's dinner, whatever vegetables were on hand from the garden, and whatever potatoes were in the root cellar all went into the same cast iron skillet. No two batches were ever the same, and that was the point. The addition of fried eggs on top became standard because, well, the chickens were always laying and a runny yolk makes everything better.

\* Photography note: A 12-inch cast iron skillet on a rustic wooden table, filled with golden crispy hash, colorful peppers visible throughout, and four sunny fried eggs nestled on top — yolks unbroken and gleaming. One yolk artfully broken with a fork, golden yolk flowing into the hash. Fresh chives scattered. Morning light streaming in from the left. Warm, hearty, rustic farmhouse mood.\*



## Midwestern Breakfast Casserole (Sausage & Egg)

*Across the Midwest*

*The undisputed champion of church potlucks, holiday mornings, and "I need to feed 12 people before 9 AM" situations. Every Midwestern family has a version. This is the one they all agree on.*

## Ingredients

- 1 lb breakfast sausage (pork, mild or spicy)
- 6 slices white bread, cubed (day-old works best)
- 2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 8 large eggs
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- Dash of Worcestershire sauce

## Instructions

- 1 **Brown the sausage:** In a large skillet over medium-high heat, cook sausage, breaking it into crumbles, until no pink remains. Drain fat.
- 2 **Layer the casserole:** Grease a 9×13-inch baking dish. Spread bread cubes in an even layer. Top with sausage, then cheese.
- 3 **Make the custard:** Whisk together eggs, milk, mustard powder, salt, pepper, onion powder, and Worcestershire sauce.
- 4 **Pour** custard evenly over the layered casserole. Press down gently so bread absorbs the liquid.
- 5 **Refrigerate** — Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 4 hours, or overnight. \*(This step is essential.)\*
- 6 **Bake:** Remove from fridge 30 minutes before baking. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Bake uncovered for 45–50 minutes until puffed, golden, and set in the center.
- 7 **Rest** 10 minutes before cutting into squares.

## At A Glance

Servings	10–12
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	45–50 minutes
Total Time	5–6 hours (includes 4+ hours refrigeration)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast & Brunch

## Tips & Variations

- Hash brown version: Replace bread with a layer of frozen shredded hash browns for a heartier base.
- Veggie swap: Substitute sausage with sautéed mushrooms, peppers, and onions.
- Cheese blend: Mix cheddar with Monterey Jack or pepper jack for variety.
- The golden rule: Overnight rest is non-negotiable. The bread needs time to soak up the custard.

## Did You Know?

This casserole is sometimes called "Christmas Morning Casserole" across the Midwest because it's assembled on Christmas Eve and baked while presents are being opened. It's engineered for efficiency — one dish, minimal morning effort, maximum satisfaction. Some families have been making the same version for four or five generations, with the recipe card passed down like a deed to the family farm.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — straight from the oven in a ceramic baking dish, steam rising, on a kitchen counter with coffee mugs and a checkered cloth. Warm morning light.\*



# Monkey Bread

*Midwest US*

*This sweet, sticky, and pull-apart bread is a beloved breakfast or brunch treat across the Midwest, perfect for sharing and a nostalgic taste of childhood.*

## Ingredients

- 2 (16.3 oz / 462g) cans refrigerated biscuit dough (e.g., Pillsbury Grands!), cut into quarters
- 1 cup (200g) granulated sugar
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ cup (113g) unsalted butter, melted
- ¾ cup (150g) packed light brown sugar
- ½ tsp vanilla extract
- Optional: ½ cup chopped pecans or walnuts

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare Pan & Preheat:** Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 10-inch (25 cm) Bundt pan or a 12-cup fluted tube pan generously with butter or cooking spray.
- 2 **Coat Biscuit Pieces:** In a large zip-top bag, combine the granulated sugar and cinnamon. Add the biscuit dough quarters to the bag, seal, and shake well until all pieces are evenly coated.
- 3 **Layer in Pan:** Arrange about half of the coated biscuit pieces in the bottom of the prepared Bundt pan. If using, sprinkle half of the chopped pecans or walnuts over the biscuits. Add the remaining coated biscuit pieces, and then the rest of the nuts.
- 4 **Make Syrup:** In a small saucepan, combine the melted butter, brown sugar, and vanilla extract. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the brown sugar is dissolved and the mixture is smooth and bubbling gently.
- 5 **Pour & Bake:** Carefully pour the hot brown sugar syrup evenly over the biscuits in the Bundt pan.
- 6 **Bake:** Bake for 30-35 minutes, or until golden brown and cooked through. To check for doneness, you can insert a thin skewer into the center; if it comes out clean, it's ready.
- 7 **Cool & Invert:** Let the Monkey Bread cool in the pan for 5-10 minutes. This is crucial for the syrup to set slightly and for easy removal.
- 8 **Serve:** Place a serving plate upside down over the Bundt pan, then carefully invert the pan to release the Monkey Bread onto the plate. Serve warm, allowing everyone to pull apart the sticky, delicious pieces.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8-10
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	30-35 minutes
Total Time	50-55 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

- Add a tablespoon of orange zest to the sugar-cinnamon coating for a bright, citrusy flavor.
- For a richer caramel flavor, add a pinch of salt to the brown sugar syrup.
- Serve with a side of cream cheese glaze (powdered sugar, milk, and cream cheese whisked together) for an extra decadent touch.
- Make ahead: Assemble the bread the night before, cover, and refrigerate. Let it sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before baking, increasing baking time by 5-10 minutes.

## Did You Know?

> Monkey Bread, also known as pull-apart bread or bubble bread, gained popularity in the mid-20th century as a fun, interactive treat. Its name likely comes from the way people pick apart the sticky pieces with their fingers, much like a monkey. It became a beloved staple in Midwestern homes, often

appearing at brunches, holiday breakfasts, and casual get-togethers, embodying the region's love for comforting, communal foods.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A warm, golden-brown Monkey Bread, inverted onto a simple white cake stand or a wooden cutting board, with sticky caramel dripping down. A few pieces are already pulled apart, showing the soft, cinnamon-sugar interior. Natural, soft morning light, with a cup of coffee and a rustic linen napkin in the background.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5

(Will bring a fresh-baked Bundt to your potluck, already inverted onto a reusable platter, and insist you take the leftovers home.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A lazy Sunday morning, the sound of kids laughing as they pull apart sticky pieces, and a big mug of coffee while catching up with family.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Monkey Bread**

> "Grandma Rose always tossed a few caramel candies in between the biscuit layers before pouring the butter sauce. 'They melt into little pockets of gooey perfection,' she'd confide, 'and make it extra special, a real surprise in every bite!'"



## Sausage Egg Breakfast Burritos

*Midwest — The Grab-and-Go Morning*

*The Heartland's answer to busy mornings. Fluffy scrambled eggs, savory breakfast sausage, crispy hash browns, and melted cheese, all wrapped in a warm flour tortilla. Make a batch on Sunday, freeze them, and you've got hot breakfasts ready for the whole week.*

## Ingredients

- The Filling
- 1 pound breakfast sausage (pork or turkey)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 large eggs
- ¼ cup whole milk
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups frozen shredded hash browns, thawed
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 cup bell peppers, diced (any color)
- ½ cup yellow onion, diced
- 2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- The Wraps
- 8 large flour tortillas (10-inch, burrito-size)
- Optional Toppings
- Salsa or pico de gallo
- Sour cream
- Sliced jalapeños
- Hot sauce
- Fresh cilantro, chopped

## Instructions

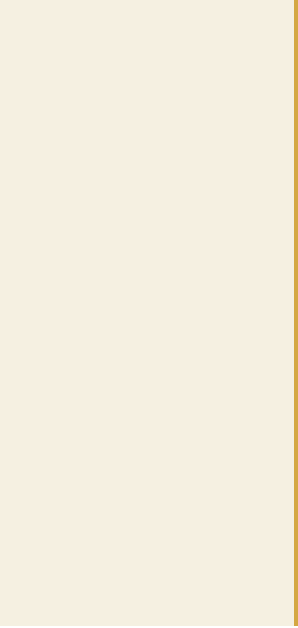
- 1 **Cook the sausage.** In a large skillet over medium-high heat, cook the breakfast sausage, breaking it into crumbles with a wooden spoon, until browned and cooked through, about 6–8 minutes. Transfer to a bowl lined with paper towels and set aside. Wipe out the skillet.
- 2 **Crisp the hash browns.** Add vegetable oil to the same skillet over medium-high heat. Add hash browns and spread into an even layer. Cook without stirring for 3–4 minutes until the bottom is golden and crispy. Flip and cook another 3–4 minutes. Season with a pinch of salt. Transfer to a bowl.
- 3 **Sauté the vegetables.** Add a drizzle of oil to the skillet if needed. Sauté bell peppers and onion over medium heat until softened and slightly caramelized, about 4–5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl.
- 4 **Scramble the eggs.** In a medium bowl, whisk eggs with milk, salt, and pepper. Melt butter in the skillet over medium-low heat. Pour in egg mixture. Cook slowly, gently folding and stirring with a spatula, until eggs are just set but still creamy, about 4–5 minutes. Remove from heat immediately — they'll continue cooking from residual heat.
- 5 **Warm the tortillas.** Wrap tortillas in damp paper towels and microwave for 30–45 seconds until pliable. Or warm them one at a time in a dry skillet for 15 seconds per side.
- 6 **Assemble.** Lay a warmed tortilla flat. Spoon a line of eggs down the center, leaving 2 inches at the top and bottom. Top with sausage, hash browns, peppers and onions, and a generous handful of cheese. Don't overfill — you need room to fold.
- 7 **Fold the burrito.** Fold the sides of the tortilla in over the filling. Then, starting from the bottom, roll the burrito up tightly, keeping the sides tucked in as you go.
- 8 **Optional crisp.** For a crispy exterior, place the burrito seam-side down in a dry skillet over medium heat. Cook for 1–2 minutes until golden. Flip and repeat.
- 9 **Serve hot.** Cut in half on a diagonal and serve with your favorite toppings.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8 burritos
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	45 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breakfast

## Tips & Variations

- Freezer Friendly: Wrap assembled burritos individually in foil, then place in a freezer bag. Freeze for up to 3 months. To reheat: unwrap, wrap in a damp paper towel, and microwave for 2–3 minutes, flipping halfway. Or bake from frozen at 350°F for 25–30 minutes.
- Bacon Version: Substitute crumbled crispy bacon for the sausage.
- Veggie Burritos: Skip the sausage and add black beans, spinach, and extra peppers.
- Spicy Kick: Add diced jalapeños to the sauté, or mix hot sauce into the eggs.
- Low-Carb: Use large lettuce leaves or low-carb tortillas instead.

- 
- Cheese Choices: Pepper Jack adds heat; Colby Jack melts beautifully; mix cheeses for more complexity.
  - Make It Saucier: Drizzle chipotle mayo or green chile sauce inside before rolling.

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### **Did You Know?**

> The breakfast burrito as we know it originated in the American Southwest, but the Midwest enthusiastically adopted it as the perfect farm-country fuel. Hearty, portable, and endlessly customizable, it fit right into the Heartland's grab-and-go culture. School mornings, early shifts, and long drives all called for something more substantial than a granola bar. The freezer-friendly version became a Midwestern mom's secret weapon — prep once, eat all week. Some families have their own signature versions passed down through generations, with debates about sausage vs. bacon as heated as any political discussion.

\* Photography note: Two breakfast burritos cut in half on a diagonal, stacked to show the colorful filling — yellow eggs, brown sausage, golden hash browns, melted cheese oozing out. Small bowl of salsa alongside. Rustic wooden cutting board. Morning kitchen scene with coffee mug in background.\*

# **Appetizers**



## Beer-Battered Fried Pickles

*Wisconsin*

*Crispy, tangy, and irresistibly dippable, these golden-fried pickle slices coated in a light, flavorful beer batter are a quintessential Midwestern pub snack.*

## Ingredients

- 1 (16 oz / 450g) jar dill pickle slices (sandwich slices work well), patted very dry
- 1.5 cups all-purpose flour, divided
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp black pepper
- ¼ tsp garlic powder
- 1 (12 oz / 355ml) can cold beer (lager or pilsner recommended)
- 4-6 cups vegetable oil, for frying
- Optional: Ranch dressing or spicy aioli, for serving

## Instructions

- 1 **Pat Pickles Dry:** Lay pickle slices on paper towels and pat them as dry as possible. This is crucial for a crispy batter.
- 2 **Prepare Battering Station:** In a large bowl, whisk together 1 cup of the all-purpose flour, baking powder, salt, pepper, and garlic powder. Gradually whisk in the cold beer until a smooth batter forms. Do not overmix; a few lumps are fine.
- 3 **Dredge Pickles:** Place the remaining ½ cup of flour in a separate shallow dish. Dredge the dried pickle slices in this flour first, shaking off any excess. This helps the beer batter adhere.
- 4 **Heat Oil:** In a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven, pour vegetable oil to a depth of about 2-3 inches. Heat the oil over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F (175°C). Use a deep-fry thermometer to monitor the temperature.
- 5 **Batter & Fry:** Working in small batches, dip each floured pickle slice into the beer batter, allowing excess to drip off. Carefully place the battered pickles into the hot oil. Fry for 2-3 minutes, flipping once, until golden brown and crispy.
- 6 **Drain & Season:** Using a slotted spoon, transfer the fried pickles to a plate lined with paper towels to drain excess oil. Immediately sprinkle with a pinch of salt.
- 7 **Serve:** Serve hot with ranch dressing or spicy aioli for dipping.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	8-10 minutes
Total Time	25-30 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Appetizers

## Tips & Variations

- Use a light, crisp beer for the batter for the best results. Highly carbonated beer will yield a lighter, crispier batter.
- For extra spice, add a pinch of cayenne pepper to the dry batter mix.
- Experiment with different pickle varieties, such as bread and butter pickles, for a sweeter tang.
- Ensure the oil maintains a consistent temperature; overcrowding the pot will lower the temperature and make the pickles greasy.

## Did You Know?

> Fried pickles are a beloved snack with origins in the Southern United States, but their irresistible crunch and tangy flavor have made them a popular pub and casual dining appetizer across the Midwest, particularly in states like Wisconsin. The beer-battered version pays homage to the region's strong

brewing traditions, making them a perfect pairing for local craft beers and a testament to Midwestern comfort food innovation.

\* Photography note: Rustic pub style. A metal basket lined with parchment paper, overflowing with golden-brown, crispy beer-battered fried pickles. One pickle should be broken open to show the soft interior. A small ramekin of ranch dressing or a spicy dip on the side. Set on a worn wooden bar top or a rustic table, with a frosty glass of amber beer blurred in the background. Warm, inviting tungsten lighting.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will share generously with friends at the local tavern, maybe even offer to buy the next round.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A lively happy hour at a local pub, cheering on your favorite sports team, and a cold, crisp Midwestern lager.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Beer-Battered Fried Pickles**

> "Grandma Jean always said the trick was to use an \*ice-cold\* beer for the batter. 'It makes the batter extra light and crispy,' she'd wink, 'like a little cloud around that pickle, don't you know!'"



## Classic Deviled Eggs

*Across the Midwest*

*No Midwestern potluck, picnic, or holiday table is complete without a platter of deviled eggs. They're the dish everyone reaches for first and the plate that's always empty. Simple, satisfying, and impossible to eat just one.*

## Ingredients

- 12 large eggs
- ½ cup mayonnaise (Hellmann's or Duke's — this is not negotiable)
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard
- 1 tablespoon sweet pickle relish
- 1 teaspoon white vinegar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- Paprika for garnish
- Fresh chives, finely snipped (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Boil eggs:** Place eggs in a single layer in a large pot. Cover with cold water by 1 inch. Bring to a rolling boil, then remove from heat, cover, and let sit exactly 12 minutes.
- 2 **Ice bath:** Transfer eggs immediately to a large bowl of ice water. Let cool at least 10 minutes.
- 3 **Peel and halve:** Peel eggs carefully under running water. Slice in half lengthwise. Pop yolks into a medium bowl.
- 4 **Make filling:** Mash yolks with a fork until smooth. Add mayo, mustard, relish, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Mix until creamy and uniform.
- 5 **Fill:** Pipe or spoon filling into egg white halves, mounding generously.
- 6 **Garnish** with a sprinkle of paprika and snipped chives.
- 7 **Chill** at least 30 minutes before serving.

## At A Glance

Servings	24 halves
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	12 minutes
Total Time	1 hour (includes chilling)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Appetizers & Snacks

## Tips & Variations

- Piping trick: Use a zip-lock bag with the corner snipped for easy, clean filling.
- Bacon & cheddar: Fold in crumbled bacon and a tablespoon of finely shredded cheddar.
- Horseradish kick: Replace mustard with 1 tablespoon prepared horseradish.
- Sriracha drizzle: For the adventurous Midwesterner — a thin drizzle on top.
- Transport: Use a deviled egg carrier. Every Midwest kitchen has one. It's practically a rite of passage.

## Did You Know?

Deviled eggs have been a staple of American potluck culture since the mid-1800s, but nowhere are they more revered than in the Midwest. At church socials and family reunions, there's an unspoken competition over whose deviled eggs are the best. The dish is so deeply embedded in Midwestern culture that specialty deviled egg plates — ceramic dishes with individual oval wells — are a common wedding gift. Some families have deviled egg plates that have been handed down for three generations.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — arranged on a vintage deviled egg plate (the kind with individual wells), garnished with paprika and chives, on a lace-trimmed cloth. Picnic table setting.\*



# Pimento Cheese Spread

*Ohio / Indiana (Midwest Potluck Staple)*

*A creamy, tangy, and slightly spicy cheese spread, a beloved potluck staple in the Midwest, perfect for sandwiches, crackers, or vegetable dippers.*

## Ingredients

- 8 oz (225g) sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- 4 oz (113g) cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup (120g) mayonnaise (Duke's or a good quality regional brand recommended)
- 1 (4 oz / 113g) jar diced pimentos, drained very well
- 1-2 tbsp (15-30ml) pickled jalapeño juice (or pickle juice)
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ¼ tsp onion powder
- ⅛ tsp cayenne pepper (or more, to taste)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- For serving: Crackers, celery sticks, bell pepper strips, or crusty bread

## Instructions

- 1 **Combine Cheeses:** In a medium bowl, combine the shredded sharp cheddar cheese and softened cream cheese.
- 2 **Add Mayonnaise & Pimentos:** Add the mayonnaise and drained diced pimentos to the bowl.
- 3 **Add Seasonings:** Pour in the pickled jalapeño juice (start with 1 tablespoon and add more if you prefer a tangier spread). Stir in the garlic powder, onion powder, and cayenne pepper.
- 4 **Mix Thoroughly:** Using a fork or a sturdy spoon, mix all the ingredients until well combined and creamy. Some small lumps of cheese are fine and add texture.
- 5 **Season to Taste:** Taste the pimento cheese and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper as needed.
- 6 **Chill (Optional):** For best flavor and to allow the spread to firm up slightly, cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes before serving.
- 7 **Serve:** Serve chilled with your favorite crackers, fresh vegetable sticks, or as a sandwich spread.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8-10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	0 minutes
Total Time	15 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Appetizers

## Tips & Variations

- For a smoother spread, use an electric mixer to combine the ingredients.
- Experiment with different types of cheese, such as white cheddar, Monterey Jack, or a smoked cheddar for varying flavor profiles.
- Add finely minced green onions or chives for a fresh oniony kick.
- For extra heat, finely chop a few pickled jalapeño slices and add them directly to the spread.

## Did You Know?

> While often associated with the American South, Pimento Cheese Spread has found a firm and beloved place in Midwestern potluck culture. Its simplicity, comforting flavor, and ability to be made ahead make it a quintessential dish for church gatherings, family reunions, and casual get-togethers. In the Midwest, it's a versatile spread that embodies the region's love for easy, crowd-pleasing appetizers that bring people together.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A small, rustic ceramic bowl filled with vibrant pimento cheese spread, garnished with a sprig of parsley or a few extra pimento pieces. Arranged on a wooden

cutting board with a selection of classic crackers (like Ritz or saltines) and crisp celery sticks. Soft, natural light from a nearby window, with a textured linen napkin nearby.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will bring a generous tub to any social gathering and subtly check if people are enjoying it.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A summer picnic in the park, a lively game night with friends, and quiet evenings on the porch with a cold glass of sweet tea.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Pimento Cheese Spread**

> "Grandma Doris always added a tiny squeeze of fresh lemon juice (just about a teaspoon!) to her pimento cheese. 'It wakes up all the flavors,' she'd insist, 'and makes it taste extra bright and fresh, like sunshine in a bowl!'"



## Spinach Artichoke Dip

*Midwest — The Party Starter*

*Creamy, cheesy, and completely irresistible. This bubbling skillet of spinach, tender artichoke hearts, and a decadent blend of cream cheese and Parmesan is the appetizer that empties first at every gathering. Serve it with crusty bread or tortilla chips and watch it disappear.*

## Ingredients

- The Dip
- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese (divided)
- 1 can (14 oz) artichoke hearts, drained and roughly chopped
- 10 ounces frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed very dry
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional)
- Pinch of ground nutmeg
- For Serving
- Sliced baguette, toasted
- Tortilla chips
- Pita bread, cut into wedges
- Raw vegetables (bell peppers, carrots, celery)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prep the spinach.** Thaw frozen spinach and squeeze out as much liquid as possible using a clean kitchen towel or several layers of paper towels. This step is crucial — wet spinach makes watery dip.
- 2 **Make the base.** Preheat oven to 375°F. In a large mixing bowl, combine softened cream cheese, sour cream, and mayonnaise. Beat with an electric mixer or stir vigorously until smooth and creamy.
- 3 **Add the flavors.** Stir in minced garlic, Parmesan cheese, and ½ cup of the mozzarella. Mix until well combined.
- 4 **Fold in the vegetables.** Add the chopped artichoke hearts and drained spinach. Fold gently until evenly distributed. Season with salt, pepper, red pepper flakes (if using), and nutmeg.
- 5 **Transfer and top.** Spread the mixture evenly into an 8-inch oven-safe skillet, small baking dish, or pie plate. Sprinkle the remaining ½ cup mozzarella over the top.
- 6 **Bake.** Bake for 20–25 minutes until the dip is bubbling around the edges and the cheese on top is melted and golden in spots.
- 7 **Broil for color (optional).** For extra golden cheese, place under the broiler for 1–2 minutes. Watch carefully to prevent burning.
- 8 **Serve hot.** Let cool for 5 minutes (it's volcanic inside), then serve with your choice of dippers.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	10–12 (as appetizer)
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	40 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Appetizers

## Tips & Variations

- Squeeze the Spinach: This cannot be overstated. Wet spinach = sad, watery dip. Get it bone dry.
- Make Ahead: Assemble the dip, cover, and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. Add 5–10 minutes to the bake time if baking from cold.
- Slow Cooker Version: Combine all ingredients in a slow cooker. Cook on low for 2–3 hours, stirring occasionally, until hot and bubbly.
- Jalapeño Addition: Add 2–3 tablespoons diced pickled jalapeños for heat.
- Bacon Lover's: Top with crumbled crispy bacon before serving.
- Bread Bowl: Hollow out a round bread loaf, fill with dip, and bake. Use the bread pieces for dipping.
- Extra Cheesy: Add ½ cup shredded white cheddar or Gruyère to the mix.
- Fresh Spinach: Use 8 oz fresh spinach, sautéed until wilted and excess moisture cooked off.

## Did You Know?



> Spinach artichoke dip became an American restaurant staple in the 1980s and 1990s, appearing on chain restaurant menus from coast to coast. The Midwest embraced it wholeheartedly — it hit all the right notes: creamy, cheesy, easy to make in big batches, and perfect for sharing. It became a fixture at Super Bowl parties, potlucks, and holiday gatherings. The combination of spinach and artichoke likely originated from Italian-American cuisine, but the addition of cream cheese and baking it until bubbly is pure American innovation. Today, it remains one of the most requested appetizers at any Heartland gathering.

\* Photography note: Cast iron skillet with bubbling spinach artichoke dip, golden cheese on top, some browned spots. A piece of toasted baguette being dipped in, showing the creamy stretch. Tortilla chips and bread slices arranged around the skillet. Rustic wooden surface with a red napkin.\*



# Wisconsin Fried Cheese Curds

*Wisconsin*

*If Wisconsin had a national dish, this would be it. Fresh cheese curds — the squeaky kind — battered and fried until golden outside, molten inside. Best served at a county fair, a Friday fish fry, or honestly anywhere with a deep fryer and zero regrets.*

## Ingredients

- Cheese Curds
- 2 lbs fresh white cheddar cheese curds (room temperature)
- Vegetable or peanut oil for frying
- Beer Batter
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup cold beer (a Wisconsin lager, naturally)
- 1 egg, beaten
- For Serving
- Ranch dressing
- Marinara sauce

## Instructions

- 1 **Prep curds:** Pat cheese curds dry with paper towels. If large, break into bite-sized pieces. They should be at room temperature (cold curds = cold centers).
- 2 **Heat oil:** Fill a deep pot or fryer with 3 inches of oil. Heat to 375°F (190°C).
- 3 **Make batter:** Whisk flour, cornstarch, baking powder, garlic powder, paprika, salt, and cayenne. Add beer and egg, whisk until just combined — lumps are fine. Batter should be thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.
- 4 **Dredge:** Toss curds in a light coating of plain flour first (helps the batter stick), then dip into beer batter, letting excess drip off.
- 5 **Fry in batches:** Carefully drop 6–8 curds at a time into hot oil. Fry 1½–2 minutes until deep golden brown. Don't overcrowd.
- 6 **Drain** on a wire rack over a sheet pan. Season with a light sprinkle of salt immediately.
- 7 **Serve** hot with ranch and marinara for dipping.

## At A Glance

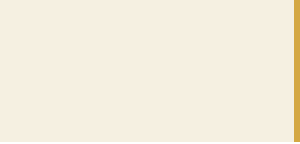
Servings	6–8 (appetizer)
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes
Total Time	25 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Appetizers & Snacks

## Tips & Variations

- The squeak test: Fresh curds should squeak against your teeth. If they don't squeak, they're not fresh enough.
- No beer? Club soda works for a lighter batter.
- Extra crispy: Double-dip — flour, batter, back in flour, batter again.
- Temperature is everything: Too cool and they're greasy. Too hot and the batter burns before the cheese melts. 375°F is the sweet spot.

## Did You Know?

Wisconsin produces over 3 billion pounds of cheese annually — more than any other state and more than most \*countries\*. Cheese curds are a byproduct of the cheesemaking process, and true Wisconsinites insist on eating them within hours of production, when they're still squeaky. The tradition of frying them in beer batter likely originated at Wisconsin county fairs in the 1990s and has since become an unofficial state food. In 2023, Wisconsin legislators even considered making the fried cheese curd the official state appetizer.



\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — piled high on parchment paper in a wire basket, golden and glistening, with a ramekin of ranch. Beer glass in background. Warm pub lighting.\*

# **Soups & Stews**



## Booyah (Community Stew)

*Northeast Wisconsin & Minnesota*

*Part stew, part social event, part civic institution — Booyah is the massive community pot of thick, meaty, vegetable-laden stew simmered outdoors in enormous kettles for church picnics, fire department fundraisers, and fall festivals. Making it is a team sport. Eating it is a regional sacrament.*

## Ingredients

- The Meats
- 2 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
- 1½ pounds beef chuck roast, cut into 2-inch chunks
- 1 pound bone-in pork shoulder or country-style ribs
- Salt and pepper for seasoning
- The Vegetables
- 6 medium russet potatoes, peeled and diced into ½-inch cubes
- 4 large carrots, peeled and diced
- 3 stalks celery, diced
- 2 large yellow onions, diced
- 1 small head green cabbage, cored and coarsely chopped
- 1 can (28 ounces) crushed tomatoes
- 2 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels
- 2 cups fresh or frozen green beans, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup fresh or frozen peas
- 1 rutabaga (about 1 pound), peeled and diced (traditional but optional)
- The Broth & Seasonings
- 10 cups chicken broth
- 4 cups beef broth
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon dried thyme
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 2 teaspoons celery salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Salt to taste
- Fresh parsley for garnish

## Instructions

- 1 **Brown the meats.** Season the chicken, beef, and pork generously with salt and pepper. In a very large stockpot (at least 12-quart) or Dutch oven, heat a thin film of oil over medium-high heat. Working in batches, brown all the meats on all sides, about 3–4 minutes per side. Don't crowd the pot — good browning builds flavor. Set browned meats aside.
- 2 **Build the base.** In the same pot, add the onions, celery, and garlic. Cook until softened, about 5 minutes, scraping up the browned bits from the bottom.
- 3 **Combine liquids and meat.** Return all the browned meats to the pot. Pour in the chicken broth and beef broth. Add the bay leaves, thyme, paprika, and celery salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to a very low simmer. Cover and cook for 2–3 hours until all the meats are falling-apart tender.
- 4 **Shred the meats.** Remove the meats to a cutting board. Shred or chop into bite-sized pieces, discarding bones, skin, and excess fat. Return the shredded meat to the pot.
- 5 **Add the vegetables in stages.** Add the potatoes, carrots, rutabaga, crushed tomatoes, and cabbage to the pot. Simmer for 30 minutes. Then add the corn, green beans, and peas. Continue simmering for another 20–30 minutes until all vegetables are tender.
- 6 **Season and thicken.** The stew should be thick and hearty — more stew than soup. If it's too thin, mash some of the potatoes against the side of the pot to thicken the broth. Season generously with salt and pepper. Remove the bay leaves.
- 7 **Rest and serve.** Like all great stews, Booyah improves with time. Let it rest 15–20 minutes before serving, or (better yet) make it the day before and reheat. Serve in deep bowls with crusty bread or saltine crackers. Garnish with fresh parsley.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	12–16
Prep Time	45 minutes
Cook Time	4–6 hours
Total Time	5–7 hours
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Soups & Stews

## Tips & Variations

- The Community Kettle Tradition: Authentic Booyah is made outdoors in 50+ gallon kettles over wood fires, stirred with canoe paddles, and simmered all day by teams of volunteers. This home version captures the flavor, if not the spectacle.
- Three-Meat Tradition: The combination of chicken, beef, AND pork is essential. Each contributes a different flavor to the broth. Don't skip any of them.
- Flat Beer Addition: Some old recipes call for adding a can of flat beer to the pot. If you try it, use a light lager.
- The Rutabaga Question: Rutabaga is traditional in Wisconsin Booyah but optional. It adds an earthy sweetness that's worth trying.

- Slow Cooker Adaptation: Brown the meats on the stove, then transfer everything to a large slow cooker. Cook on low for 8–10 hours. Add quicker-cooking vegetables (corn, peas) in the last hour.
- Freezes Beautifully: Booyah is even better the next day and freezes well for up to 3 months.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Nobody's entirely sure where the name "Booyah" comes from. The leading theories include: a corruption of \*bouillon\* (French for broth), a derivation of \*bouillir\* (French for "to boil"), or possibly a Belgian-Walloon word brought by immigrants who settled in Northeast Wisconsin's Door County and Green Bay area. What everyone agrees on is that Booyah is a community event as much as a recipe. Churches, fire departments, VFW posts, and civic organizations in Wisconsin and Minnesota hold Booyah festivals where volunteers arrive before dawn to start the kettles, families buy quarts to take home, and the whole town comes together over a pot of stew that's big enough to swim in. The Green Bay area alone hosts dozens of Booyah events every fall, and some organizations guard their recipes as closely as state secrets.

\* Photography note: A deep, rustic bowl of thick, chunky stew showing the variety of meats and vegetables in a rich broth. A large ladle rests across the top. Background suggests an outdoor fall festival setting — maybe autumn leaves and a glimpse of a large kettle. Warm, communal, hearty energy. Natural daylight.\*



## Cincinnati Chili

*Cincinnati, Ohio*

*Not your Texas chili and not your mama's spaghetti — Cincinnati chili is its own glorious thing: a cinnamon-and-cocoa-scented meat sauce ladled over spaghetti and buried under a mountain of finely shredded cheddar. Order it by the "Way" and argue about it forever.*

## Ingredients

- The Chili
- 2 pounds ground beef (80/20)
- 1 quart water
- 1 can (6 ounces) tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 large yellow onion, finely diced (about 1½ cups)
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1½ teaspoons ground allspice
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (adjust to taste)
- 1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- For Serving — Build Your "Way"
- 1 pound spaghetti, cooked and drained
- 2 cups finely shredded mild cheddar cheese (the finer the better)
- 1 large yellow onion, finely diced (raw)
- 1 can (15 ounces) kidney beans, drained and warmed
- Oyster crackers
- Hot sauce (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 Boil the beef.** This is the key technique that makes Cincinnati chili unique. Place the ground beef in a large pot and cover with 1 quart of cold water. Stir and break up the meat as the water comes to a boil over medium-high heat. You want the meat to become very finely textured, almost like a sauce — no big chunks.
- 2 Skim if needed.** Once boiling, reduce heat to medium. Some foam may rise to the surface; skim it off and discard.
- 3 Add the aromatics and spices.** Stir in the diced onion, garlic, tomato paste, vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, chili powder, cumin, cinnamon, allspice, cloves, cayenne, cocoa powder, bay leaves, salt, and pepper. Stir well to combine everything.
- 4 Simmer low and slow.** Reduce heat to low, partially cover, and simmer for 1½ to 2 hours, stirring occasionally. The chili should reduce and thicken to a saucy, not soupy, consistency. If it gets too thick, add a splash of water.
- 5 Taste and adjust.** Cincinnati chili is all about balance — you should taste warmth from the cinnamon and allspice, a hint of chocolate depth from the cocoa, and a slow-building heat from the chili powder and cayenne. Adjust salt, cayenne, or vinegar as needed. Remove bay leaves.
- 6 Cook the spaghetti.** While the chili finishes, cook spaghetti according to package directions. Drain well.
- 7 Plate your Way.** Mound spaghetti on an oval plate. Ladle chili generously over the top. Add your chosen toppings in order (beans, then onions, then cheese). The cheese should completely blanket the top — in Cincinnati, moderation is not a virtue when it comes to cheese.
- 8 Serve with oyster crackers** and hot sauce on the side.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	2 hours
Total Time	2 hours 15 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Soups & Stews / Mains

## The Cincinnati "Ways" Serving Guide

Way	What's On the Plate
2-Way	Spaghetti + Chili
3-Way	Spaghetti + Chili + Shredded Cheddar
4-Way (Onion)	Spaghetti + Chili + Onion + Cheddar
4-Way (Bean)	Spaghetti + Chili + Beans + Cheddar
5-Way	Spaghetti + Chili + Onion + Beans + Cheddar

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### Tips & Variations

- The Boil Method Matters: Boiling the beef in water (rather than browning it) gives Cincinnati chili its signature fine, sauce-like texture. Don't skip this step.
- Make It Ahead: Cincinnati chili tastes even better the next day as the spices meld. Refrigerate overnight and reheat.
- Cheese Matters: Use the finest shred setting on your box grater, or buy the pre-shredded "fine" cheddar. The fine shreds melt into the hot chili beautifully.
- Coney Dogs: Ladle the chili over a hot dog in a steamed bun, top with shredded cheese, diced onion, and yellow mustard for a classic Coney.
- Freeze It: Chili freezes beautifully for up to 3 months. Freeze in individual portions for quick weeknight dinners.

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### Did You Know?

> Cincinnati chili was invented in 1922 by Macedonian immigrant Tom Kiradjieff, who ran a hot dog stand called Empress. Drawing on Mediterranean and Middle Eastern spice traditions — the cinnamon, allspice, and cloves that seem unusual in American chili — he created something entirely new. The dish spread through a network of competing "chili parlors," with Skyline (founded 1949) and Gold Star (founded 1965) becoming the most famous. Today, Cincinnati has more chili parlors per capita than any city has of any single type of restaurant. Locals are fiercely loyal to their preferred parlor, and the 2-Way through 5-Way ordering system is taught to every Cincinnati child before they learn to ride a bike.

\* Photography note: Oval plate with a generous 5-Way — spaghetti barely visible under rich chili, diced white onion, kidney beans, and an absurd mountain of finely shredded cheddar cheese. Oyster crackers scattered nearby. Overhead shot on a Formica-style diner counter. Bright, slightly retro diner lighting.\*



# Corn Chowder

*Iowa*

*This is Iowa in a bowl: sweet corn so fresh it still tastes like August sunshine, swimming in cream with smoky bacon and tender potatoes. It's the soup that celebrates the reason Iowans endure miles of endless cornfields — because when corn is this good, you forgive it for blocking every horizon from June to October.*

## Ingredients

- 6 slices thick-cut bacon, diced
- 1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 large russet potatoes (about 1.5 lbs / 680g), peeled and diced into ½-inch cubes
- 4 cups (960ml) chicken broth
- 4 cups (600g) corn kernels (fresh from about 6 ears, frozen, or canned and drained)
- 1 cup (240ml) heavy cream or half-and-half
- ½ tsp dried thyme
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Fresh chives, chopped, for garnish (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook Bacon:** In a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot, cook diced bacon over medium heat until crispy. Remove bacon with a slotted spoon and set aside on paper towels. Leave about 2 tablespoons of bacon drippings in the pot.
- 2 **Sauté Aromatics:** Add chopped onion and celery to the bacon drippings. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5-7 minutes. Add minced garlic and cook for 1 minute more.
- 3 **Add Potatoes & Broth:** Add the diced potatoes and chicken broth. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 10-15 minutes, or until potatoes are tender.
- 4 **Add Corn:** Stir in the corn kernels and dried thyme. Simmer for an additional 5-10 minutes.
- 5 **Thicken (Optional):** For a thicker chowder, use a potato masher to mash some of the potatoes directly in the pot, or ladle out 1-2 cups of the soup, blend until smooth, and return to the pot.
- 6 **Add Cream:** Stir in the heavy cream (or half-and-half). Heat through gently without boiling. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste.
- 7 **Serve:** Ladle the hot corn chowder into bowls. Garnish with reserved crispy bacon bits and fresh chopped chives, if desired. Serve immediately.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	30-35 minutes
Total Time	45-50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Soups

## Tips & Variations

- For a spicier chowder, add a pinch of cayenne pepper or a dash of hot sauce along with the other seasonings.
- To make it a hearty main course, add cooked, shredded chicken or ham during the last 10 minutes of simmering.
- If using fresh corn, consider scraping the "milk" from the cobs after removing the kernels for extra corn flavor in the broth.
- For an even richer base, a small pat of butter can be added at the end.

## Did You Know?

> Iowa doesn't just grow corn — it *is* corn. With over 13 million acres planted annually (that's 90% of the state's farmland), Iowa produces more corn than most countries. The Iowa State Fair's annual Corn Dog competition and Blue Ribbon Foundation's sweet corn stands serve thousands of ears daily, roasted right on the grounds. But corn chowder has deeper roots: it was a practical farmhouse meal

during late summer harvest, when corn was abundant and field hands needed hearty, filling food. Many Iowa families have their own "detasseling summer" memories — teenagers walking cornfields to remove tassels for seed production, then coming home to big pots of corn chowder made from the day's harvest. The tradition of cutting kernels fresh from the cob and scraping the "corn milk" into the pot is pure Iowa ingenuity — waste nothing, especially when it adds flavor. County extension cookbooks from the 1950s-70s are filled with corn chowder variations, each claiming to be the "original" farm recipe.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A deep, earthenware bowl filled with creamy corn chowder, garnished with crispy bacon bits and fresh green chives. A few kernels of corn and potato cubes are visible. The bowl is set on a worn wooden table, possibly with a subtle linen napkin. Soft, warm overhead lighting highlights the texture and steam.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will bring a large pot to your house after a chilly fall day, insisting you have "just one more bowl.")

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A crisp autumn evening, a visit to a local corn maze, and the warm glow of a harvest moon.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Corn Chowder**

> "Grandma Dorothy always added a secret ingredient: a spoonful of pickled jalapeño juice (about a teaspoon!) right before serving. 'It gives it a little zing,' she'd declare, 'that makes all those sweet corn flavors pop!'"



## Cream of Tomato Soup

*Midwest — The Childhood Classic*

*Silky, tangy, and warmly sweet, this is the tomato soup of your memories — but better. Made from scratch with real tomatoes, a touch of cream, and just enough herbs, it's the perfect partner for a golden grilled cheese sandwich. Simple, satisfying, and utterly timeless.*

## Ingredients

- The Soup
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 2 medium carrots, peeled and diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 cans (28 oz each) whole peeled San Marzano tomatoes
- 3 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons fresh basil, chiffonade (optional)
- For Serving
- Extra cream for drizzling
- Fresh basil leaves
- Grilled cheese sandwiches
- Crusty bread

## Instructions

- 1 **Sauté the aromatics.** In a large Dutch oven or heavy pot, melt butter over medium heat. Add onion and carrots. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 8–10 minutes until softened and the onion is translucent.
- 2 **Add garlic and tomato paste.** Add garlic and cook for 1 minute until fragrant. Stir in tomato paste and cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly, to caramelize it slightly and deepen the flavor.
- 3 **Add tomatoes and broth.** Pour in the canned tomatoes with their juices, crushing them with your hands or a spoon as you add them. Add broth, sugar, salt, pepper, dried basil, oregano, and bay leaf. Stir to combine.
- 4 **Simmer.** Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Simmer uncovered for 20–25 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the carrots are very tender and the flavors have melded.
- 5 **Remove bay leaf and blend.** Discard the bay leaf. Using an immersion blender, blend the soup directly in the pot until completely smooth. (Alternatively, carefully transfer in batches to a blender, blend until smooth, and return to the pot.)
- 6 **Add the cream.** Reduce heat to low. Stir in heavy cream until fully incorporated. Taste and adjust seasoning — add more sugar if too acidic, more salt if flat.
- 7 **Serve.** Ladle into bowls. Drizzle with a swirl of cream, scatter fresh basil on top, and serve immediately with grilled cheese sandwiches for dipping.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	35 minutes
Total Time	50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Soups

## Tips & Variations

- San Marzano Tomatoes: These Italian plum tomatoes are sweeter and less acidic than regular canned tomatoes. They make a noticeable difference. If unavailable, use the best quality whole peeled tomatoes you can find.
- Roasted Tomato Version: In summer, use 3 pounds fresh tomatoes, halved and roasted at 400°F for 30 minutes until caramelized. Proceed with the recipe.
- Dairy-Free: Substitute coconut cream for heavy cream, or omit entirely for a lighter soup.
- Smoky Twist: Add ½ teaspoon smoked paprika and a chipotle pepper in adobo.
- Grilled Cheese Croutons: Cut grilled cheese sandwiches into cubes and float them on top.
- Slow Cooker: Combine all ingredients except cream in a slow cooker. Cook on low for 6–8 hours. Blend, then stir in cream.
- Freezer Friendly: Freeze without the cream. When reheating, warm the soup and stir in fresh cream.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Cream of tomato soup became an American icon thanks to Dr. John T. Dorrance, who invented condensed soup for Campbell's in 1897. The famous red-and-white can became so ubiquitous that Andy Warhol immortalized it in his 1962 pop art series. But generations of Midwestern cooks knew that homemade was better. Farm wives would can summer tomatoes specifically for winter soup-making, adding cream from their dairy cows for richness. The pairing with grilled cheese sandwiches likely emerged during the Great Depression when both foods were cheap and filling. Today, this duo remains the ultimate comfort food combination — a taste of childhood in every bowl.

\* Photography note: White ceramic bowl filled with vibrant orange-red tomato soup, beautiful cream swirl on top, fresh basil leaves floating. Golden grilled cheese sandwich half on the side, cheese stretching. White marble surface with a green cloth napkin. Bright, clean lighting.\*



# Hearty Chicken Noodle Soup

*Midwest — Every Kitchen, Every Cold Day*

*The Midwest's answer to everything: a cold snap, a bad day, a stuffy nose, or just a Wednesday in February. Wide egg noodles swimming in rich golden broth with tender chicken, chunky vegetables, and enough warmth to thaw you from the inside out.*

## Ingredients

- The Soup
- 1 whole chicken (about 4 pounds), or 3 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs and breasts
- 12 cups cold water
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 large carrots, peeled and diced (about 1 cup)
- 3 stalks celery, diced (about 1 cup)
- 1 large yellow onion, diced (about 1½ cups)
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 bay leaves
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme (or 1 teaspoon dried thyme)
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped, plus more for garnish
- 8 ounces wide egg noodles
- 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

## Instructions

- 1 **Simmer the chicken.** Place the whole chicken (or chicken pieces) in a large stockpot. Cover with 12 cups cold water. Bring to a boil over high heat, then immediately reduce to a gentle simmer. Skim off any foam that rises to the surface. Add the bay leaves and thyme sprigs. Partially cover and simmer gently for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until the chicken is cooked through and falling-off-the-bone tender.
- 2 **Remove and shred the chicken.** Using tongs, carefully transfer the chicken to a large cutting board. Let it cool enough to handle, about 10 minutes. Shred the meat into bite-sized pieces, discarding the skin and bones. Set the shredded chicken aside.
- 3 **Strain the broth.** Strain the broth through a fine-mesh sieve into a large bowl or clean pot. Discard the bay leaves and thyme stems. You should have about 10 cups of rich, golden broth. (If less, add chicken broth to supplement.)
- 4 **Cook the vegetables.** In the same pot (wiped clean), melt the butter over medium heat. Add the carrots, celery, and onion. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are softened but not browned, about 8–10 minutes. Add the garlic and cook 1 minute more.
- 5 **Combine broth and vegetables.** Pour the strained broth back into the pot with the vegetables. Bring to a boil.
- 6 **Cook the noodles.** Add the egg noodles and cook according to package directions (usually 6–8 minutes), until tender.
- 7 **Add the chicken.** Stir the shredded chicken back into the soup. Add the apple cider vinegar (it brightens the whole pot). Season generously with salt and pepper — chicken soup needs more salt than you think.
- 8 **Serve.** Ladle into deep bowls and garnish with fresh chopped parsley. Serve with crusty bread, saltine crackers, or oyster crackers.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	1 hour 15 minutes
Total Time	1 hour 35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Soups

## Tips & Variations

- The Homemade Broth Difference: Making the broth from the whole chicken as part of the process is what gives this soup its soul. Shortcuts exist, but they're not the same.
- Noodle Options: Wide egg noodles are classic Midwest, but you can use homemade noodles (rolled and cut into strips) for the ultimate version. Some families use dumplings instead.
- Rotisserie Shortcut: In a hurry? Use a store-bought rotisserie chicken and 10 cups of good-quality chicken broth. Shred the meat and simmer with the vegetables.
- Freezing: Freeze the soup WITHOUT the noodles (they'll turn mushy). Cook fresh noodles when you reheat.

- Add More Vegetables: Diced potatoes, corn, peas, or green beans all work beautifully.
- Extra Richness: Stir in 2 tablespoons of heavy cream at the end for a luxurious finish.

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### **Did You Know?**

> The Midwest's devotion to chicken noodle soup runs deeper than comfort — it's practical. Historically, farm families kept chickens for eggs, and when a hen stopped laying, she went into the soup pot. The long simmering of a tougher old hen produced the richest, most flavorful broth. Wide egg noodles became the Midwest's noodle of choice because German and Eastern European immigrants brought their noodle-making traditions with them, and egg noodles held up beautifully in broth. Today, the Campbell's Soup plant in Napoleon, Ohio, produces a significant portion of America's canned chicken noodle soup — but every Midwesterner knows that nothing compares to homemade.

\* Photography note: Deep ceramic bowl filled with golden soup, wide egg noodles visible, chunks of chicken and bright orange carrots. A spoon lifting a noodle. Shot from a slight angle on a wooden table. Crusty bread and a cloth napkin alongside. Warm, steamy, comforting winter light from a nearby window.\*



## Loaded Baked Potato Soup

*Midwest — The Bowl of Comfort*

*Everything you love about a loaded baked potato, transformed into a thick, creamy soup. Tender potato chunks swimming in a velvety broth, topped with sharp cheddar, crispy bacon, sour cream, and fresh chives. This is the soup that makes winter bearable.*

## Ingredients

- The Soup
- 4 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 8 slices thick-cut bacon
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1½ teaspoons fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- The Toppings
- 2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- Reserved crumbled bacon
- Sour cream
- Fresh chives, chopped
- Green onions, sliced (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook the potatoes.** Place potato cubes in a large pot and cover with cold, salted water. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce to a simmer. Cook for 15–20 minutes until fork-tender. Drain and set aside.
- 2 **Cook the bacon.** While potatoes cook, arrange bacon in a single layer in a large Dutch oven or heavy pot. Cook over medium heat, flipping occasionally, until crispy, about 8–10 minutes. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Crumble when cool. Reserve 2 tablespoons of bacon fat in the pot.
- 3 **Build the base.** Add butter to the bacon fat and melt over medium heat. Add onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook for 1 minute until fragrant.
- 4 **Make the roux.** Sprinkle flour over the onions and stir constantly for 2 minutes to cook out the raw flour taste.
- 5 **Add the liquids.** Gradually pour in chicken broth, whisking constantly to prevent lumps. Add milk and heavy cream. Bring to a gentle simmer.
- 6 **Add the potatoes.** Add the cooked potatoes to the pot. Using a potato masher or the back of a wooden spoon, mash about half of the potatoes to thicken the soup while leaving chunks for texture.
- 7 **Finish the soup.** Stir in sour cream, salt, pepper, and smoked paprika. Simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until thick and creamy. Adjust seasoning to taste.
- 8 **Serve loaded.** Ladle soup into bowls. Top each serving generously with shredded cheddar, crumbled bacon, a dollop of sour cream, and a shower of fresh chives.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	40 minutes
Total Time	1 hour
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Soups

## Tips & Variations

- **Potato Choice:** Russets are starchier and break down beautifully to thicken the soup. Yukon Golds work but stay chunkier.
- **Texture Control:** Mash more potatoes for a thicker soup, fewer for a chunkier version. You can also blend part of the soup for ultra-creamy consistency.
- **Slow Cooker:** Sauté onion and garlic, make the roux, then transfer everything to a slow cooker. Cook on low for 6–8 hours.
- **Vegetarian Version:** Skip the bacon, use vegetable broth, and top with vegetarian bacon bits.
- **Extra Cheesy:** Stir 1 cup shredded cheddar directly into the soup before serving.
- **Broccoli Addition:** Add 2 cups steamed broccoli florets for a broccoli-potato hybrid.
- **Make It Lighter:** Substitute half-and-half for heavy cream and use reduced-fat sour cream.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Loaded baked potato soup emerged as a restaurant favorite in the 1980s, combining the Midwest's two great loves: potatoes and soup. Idaho and the upper Midwest grow vast quantities of russet potatoes, making them an everyday staple. The "loaded" part — bacon, cheese, sour cream, and chives — mirrors the toppings on a classic steakhouse baked potato. This soup became a church supper and potluck favorite because it's easy to make in large batches and everyone loves it. On a freezing January day in Minnesota or Iowa, there's nothing more comforting than a steaming bowl of this golden goodness.

\* Photography note: Deep ceramic bowl filled with creamy white potato soup, generously topped with shredded orange cheddar, crispy bacon crumbles, a swirl of sour cream, and bright green chives. Crusty bread slice on the side. Wooden table with a blue striped napkin. Steam rising, cozy winter lighting.\*



## Minnesota Wild Rice Soup

*Minnesota*

*This soup tastes like a Minnesota lake country November: earthy wild rice harvested from northern waters, cream as thick as fog over the Iron Range, and the kind of warmth that makes you grateful for a cabin with a woodstove. It's the soup Minnesotans serve to out-of-state guests to explain why they endure six-month winters — one bowl, and you get it.*

## Ingredients

- 1 cup (170g) wild rice, rinsed
- 6 cups (1.4L) chicken broth, divided
- 2 tbsp (30g) unsalted butter
- 1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
- 2 carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 8 oz (225g) sliced fresh mushrooms (cremini or white button)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup (60g) all-purpose flour
- 2 cups (480ml) milk or half-and-half, warmed
- 1 cup (240ml) heavy cream
- 2 cups (300g) cooked chicken, shredded or diced
- ½ tsp dried thyme
- ½ tsp dried sage
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Fresh parsley, chopped, for garnish (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook Wild Rice:** In a medium saucepan, combine the rinsed wild rice with 3 cups of chicken broth. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer for 35-45 minutes, or until the wild rice is tender and has "flowered" (opened up). Drain any excess liquid and set aside.
- 2 **Sauté Vegetables:** While the rice cooks, melt butter in a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat. Add chopped onion, carrots, and celery. Cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 8-10 minutes. Add sliced mushrooms and continue to cook until they release their liquid and begin to brown, about 5-7 minutes. Stir in minced garlic and cook for 1 minute more until fragrant.
- 3 **Make Roux:** Sprinkle flour over the cooked vegetables and stir constantly for 1-2 minutes to create a light golden roux.
- 4 **Add Liquids:** Gradually whisk in the remaining 3 cups of chicken broth, stirring constantly to prevent lumps. Bring the mixture to a simmer, whisking until it thickens.
- 5 **Add Dairy & Seasonings:** Reduce heat to low. Slowly whisk in the warmed milk (or half-and-half) and heavy cream. Stir in the cooked wild rice, cooked chicken, dried thyme, and dried sage.
- 6 **Simmer & Season:** Let the soup simmer gently for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally, to allow the flavors to meld and the soup to heat through completely. Taste and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper as needed.
- 7 **Serve:** Ladle the hot Minnesota Wild Rice Soup into bowls. Garnish with fresh chopped parsley, if desired. Serve immediately.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	45-55 minutes
Total Time	65-75 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Soups

## Tips & Variations

- For a vegetarian version, omit the chicken and use vegetable broth, adding extra mushrooms or other vegetables.
- Add a splash of dry sherry or white wine to the vegetables before adding the broth for an extra layer of complexity.
- If you prefer a thicker soup, you can reduce the amount of milk slightly or increase the flour in the roux.
- Make ahead: The soup (without the cream) can be made a day in advance. Add the cream and chicken when reheating gently on the stovetop.

## Did You Know?

> Wild rice, or *Zizania aquatica*, is not actually a rice but the seed of an aquatic grass native to the Great Lakes region, especially Minnesota. It holds deep cultural significance for Indigenous communities and is Minnesota's official state grain. Minnesota Wild Rice Soup is a beloved dish that showcases this unique grain, offering a nutty flavor and chewy texture that epitomizes the state's natural bounty and comforting, hearty cuisine, particularly popular during the long, cold winters.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A deep, wide ceramic bowl filled with creamy Minnesota Wild Rice Soup, showcasing the dark wild rice grains, tender chicken, and colorful vegetables. A garnish of fresh parsley. The bowl sits on a wooden table, possibly with a subtly patterned tablecloth, bathed in soft, natural overhead lighting. A vintage spoon resting in the bowl enhances the cozy feel.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will bring a thermos full to your ice fishing house, or to a neighbor battling a winter cold.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A roaring fire on a cold winter's night, a quiet afternoon watching the snow fall, and stories of the cabin up north.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Minnesota Wild Rice Soup**

> "Grandma Ingrid always added a tiny splash of dry sherry (about a tablespoon!) to her soup right before adding the cream. 'It just makes the flavors sing,' she'd say, 'like a choir of angels, don't you know!'"



## Wisconsin Beer Cheese Soup

*Wisconsin*

*Two of Wisconsin's greatest exports — beer and cheese — in one bowl. This is a thick, velvety soup that tastes like a warm hug from a dairy farmer. It's the kind of soup that makes you understand why people voluntarily live through Wisconsin winters.*

## Ingredients

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 medium onion, finely diced
- 2 carrots, finely diced
- 2 stalks celery, finely diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 12 oz beer (a Wisconsin amber lager or pale ale — nothing too hoppy)
- 4 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese (about 1 lb)
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- Salt and white pepper to taste
- Dash of hot sauce (optional)
- Garnish
- Crumbled bacon
- Chopped chives or green onions
- Soft pretzel pieces or croutons
- Extra shredded cheese

## Instructions

- 1 **Sauté aromatics:** Melt butter in a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add onion, carrots, and celery. Cook 6–7 minutes until softened. Add garlic, cook 1 minute.
- 2 **Make the roux:** Sprinkle flour over vegetables and stir constantly for 2 minutes to cook out the raw flour taste.
- 3 **Add liquids:** Slowly pour in chicken broth while stirring. Then add milk and cream. Bring to a gentle simmer, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes until slightly thickened.
- 4 **Add beer:** Pour in the beer. It will foam — stir through it. Simmer 5 minutes.
- 5 **Add cheese:** Reduce heat to low. Add cheddar a handful at a time, stirring until each addition is melted before adding more. Do not boil — boiling makes cheese grainy.
- 6 **Season:** Stir in Dijon, Worcestershire, paprika, salt, white pepper, and hot sauce if using.
- 7 **Blend (optional):** For silky-smooth soup, use an immersion blender. For rustic texture, leave as-is.
- 8 **Serve** in bowls topped with crumbled bacon, chives, and pretzel pieces.

## At A Glance

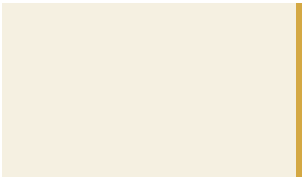
Servings	6–8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes
Total Time	45 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Soups & Stews

## Tips & Variations

- Cheese selection: Sharp or extra-sharp cheddar is essential for flavor. Pre-shredded cheese has anti-caking agents that prevent smooth melting — shred your own from a block.
- Beer choice matters: A malty amber or pale ale works best. IPAs are too bitter. Stouts are too heavy. When in doubt, Spotted Cow.
- Low heat with the cheese: This is the most important step. High heat + cheese = grainy, broken soup.
- Pretzel bowls: Serve in hollowed-out pretzel bread bowls for the full Wisconsin experience.
- Broccoli addition: Add 2 cups steamed broccoli florets for a broccoli-beer-cheese variation.

## Did You Know?

Wisconsin is home to more than 1,200 licensed cheesemakers — more than any other state. The tradition of beer cheese soup likely evolved from German and Swiss immigrant cooking traditions that merged with Wisconsin's booming dairy and brewing industries. It's a staple at Friday fish fries (another Wisconsin institution) and appears on menus from supper clubs to stadium concessions. Wisconsin is so proud of its cheese heritage that it remains the only state where you can earn a "Master Cheesemaker" certification — a program that takes a minimum of 12 years to complete.



\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — thick creamy soup in a stoneware bowl, crumbled bacon and chives on top, pretzel bread on the side. Wooden table, amber backlight suggesting a cozy pub setting.\*

# Mains



## American Goulash

*Everywhere in the Midwest — Every Mom's Weeknight Rotation Since 1955*

*Elbow macaroni, ground beef, tomatoes, and a shake of whatever spices are in the cabinet, all simmered together in one pot until it becomes something warm, filling, and impossibly comforting. Hungarians would not recognize this. Your kids won't care. This is the dish that fed a generation of latchkey kids and still shows up on church supper menus with zero irony.*

## Ingredients

- 1½ pounds ground beef (80/20)
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 can (28 ounces) crushed tomatoes
- 1 can (15 ounces) tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons paprika (sweet Hungarian, if you want to at least nod at the name)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 cups elbow macaroni, uncooked
- Shredded cheddar cheese, for serving

## Instructions

- 1 **Brown the beef.** In a large Dutch oven or deep skillet over medium-high heat, cook the ground beef, breaking it into crumbles, until browned and no pink remains, about 6–8 minutes. If there's a lot of grease, drain some off (leave a tablespoon for flavor — this isn't health food).
- 2 **Sauté the aromatics.** Add the diced onion to the beef and cook until softened, about 4 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds, until fragrant.
- 3 **Build the sauce.** Add the crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce, beef broth, tomato paste, Worcestershire sauce, paprika, oregano, basil, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Stir everything together and bring to a simmer.
- 4 **Cook the pasta in the sauce.** Add the uncooked elbow macaroni directly to the pot. Stir well. Cover partially and simmer for 15–18 minutes, stirring every few minutes to prevent the pasta from sticking to the bottom. The pasta will cook in the sauce, absorbing all that tomato-beefy goodness. Add a splash of broth or water if it gets too thick before the pasta is tender.
- 5 **Check seasoning.** Taste and adjust salt, pepper, and paprika. American goulash should taste warmly spiced, tomatoey, and beefy — not bland. Don't be shy with the paprika.
- 6 **Serve.** Ladle into bowls and top with a generous handful of shredded cheddar cheese. Serve with buttered bread or saltine crackers. There is no wrong way to eat this.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6–8
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes
Total Time	40 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains / One-Pot

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Peak potluck energy. If you show up to a church basement with a crockpot of goulash, you *are* the party. This is the most Midwestern dish that doesn't have tater tots in it.

## Tips & Variations

- **The Name:** Let's be clear — this has almost nothing in common with Hungarian goulash (*gulyás*), which is a paprika-spiced beef and vegetable soup/stew with no pasta. American goulash is its own thing, and it earned its own identity through decades of feeding Midwestern families. Respect both traditions.

- **One-Pot, No Excuses:** The beauty of cooking the pasta directly in the sauce is that it absorbs all the flavor and the starch thickens the sauce. Do NOT boil the pasta separately and add it. You'll lose what makes this dish great.

- **Slow Cooker Version:** Brown the beef and onion, then transfer everything (including the uncooked pasta) to a slow cooker. Cook on low for 4–5 hours or high for 2–3. Add the pasta in the last 30 minutes

if you don't want it too soft.

- Cheesy Goulash: Stir in 1 cup of shredded cheddar or Velveeta during the last 5 minutes of cooking. It becomes something dangerously close to hamburger helper, but better because you made it yourself.

- Green Pepper Controversy: Some families add diced green bell pepper. Other families consider this a betrayal. This recipe respects your right to choose.

- Upgrade It: Swap ground beef for Italian sausage. Add mushrooms. Throw in a bay leaf. Use fire-roasted tomatoes. But know that the classic, unfussy version is the one that people actually want.

> Grandma's Secret: \*A tablespoon of sugar in the sauce. I know. But it cuts the acidity of the tomatoes and makes the whole pot taste rounder. Nobody ever guesses, and everybody always asks for the recipe.\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A school night when nobody planned dinner, a loaf of white bread that exists only to sop up sauce, and the knowledge that this exact same meal is being cooked in approximately 14,000 other Midwestern homes tonight.

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### **Did You Know?**

> American goulash — also called "slumgullion," "johnny marzetti" (in Ohio), or simply "that ground beef and macaroni thing" — is one of the Midwest's most beloved weeknight dinners, and it has almost nothing to do with Hungary. The name was borrowed (loosely) from Hungarian immigrants whose paprika-rich stews inspired American home cooks to create a simplified, pantry-friendly version. The dish became ubiquitous in the 1940s and 50s, when canned tomatoes, ground beef, and dried pasta were cheap, available, and easy to combine in a single pot. It appeared in community cookbooks, school cafeterias, and church suppers across the region. In Ohio, the similar "Johnny Marzetti" was named after a restaurant owner's brother-in-law and became a cafeteria staple in Columbus public schools. Whatever you call it, it's the taste of being ten years old and knowing dinner was going to be fine.

\* Photography note: A big Dutch oven or deep bowl of American goulash — elbow macaroni visible in the rich red sauce, melted cheddar cheese on top, maybe some steam rising. A wooden spoon resting on the rim. A piece of buttered bread on the side. Kitchen table, checked tablecloth, weeknight energy. Cozy, unfussy, the visual equivalent of a warm hug.\*



## Bratwurst with Sauerkraut

Wisconsin

*In Wisconsin, bratwurst isn't just food. It's currency, ritual, and civic duty. You'll find brats simmering in beer and onions at every Lambeau Field tailgate, backyard cookout, firehouse fundraiser, and county fair from Green Bay to Milwaukee. The proper method is non-negotiable: boil first in beer, then char on the grill, then serve on a hard roll with sauerkraut, mustard, and nothing else unless you want an argument. Ketchup is treason. Buns are for hotdogs. This is Wisconsin law.*

## Ingredients

- For the Brats:
- 6 fresh (uncooked) bratwurst sausages (Johnsonville, Usinger's, or local butcher)
- 2 large yellow onions, sliced thick
- 3 cups (720ml) beer (cheap lager — save the craft beer for drinking)
- 1 cup (240ml) water
- 2 tbsp butter
- 1 tbsp brown sugar (optional, helps caramelize the onions)
- For the Sauerkraut:
- 1 lb (450g) sauerkraut, drained and rinsed
- 1 apple (Granny Smith or Honeycrisp), peeled and diced (optional but encouraged)
- 1 tbsp butter
- 1 tsp caraway seeds (optional, traditional)
- ½ cup (120ml) of the beer from boiling the brats
- For Serving:
- 6 hard rolls or semmel buns (NOT hotdog buns)
- Yellow mustard or spicy brown mustard
- Diced raw onion (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Simmer the Brats:** In a large pot or Dutch oven, combine the beer, water, sliced onions, and butter. Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Add the bratwurst and reduce heat to low. Simmer gently (do NOT boil) for 15-20 minutes, turning occasionally. The brats should be cooked through but not burst. Reserve the beer-onion mixture.
- 2 **Prepare the Sauerkraut:** While the brats simmer, melt 1 tbsp butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the drained sauerkraut, diced apple (if using), caraway seeds, and ½ cup of the beer-onion liquid from the brats. Simmer for 10-15 minutes until the flavors meld and the sauerkraut is tender. Keep warm.
- 3 **Grill the Brats:** Preheat a grill (or grill pan) to medium-high heat. Remove the brats from the beer bath and place them on the grill. Char on all sides until the casings are crispy and darkened, about 3-5 minutes per side. You want deep grill marks and a good snap when you bite into them.
- 4 **Caramelize the Onions (Optional but Encouraged):** Strain the onions from the beer bath. Heat a skillet over medium heat with a bit of butter or oil. Add the beer-soaked onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until caramelized and golden, about 5-7 minutes. Sprinkle with brown sugar if you want extra sweetness.
- 5 **Serve:** Place each grilled brat in a hard roll. Top with a generous spoonful of warm sauerkraut and caramelized onions. Add mustard. Serve immediately. Eat standing up. Argue about football.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4-6 brats (doubles or triples for tailgates)
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- The Beer Bath is Law: Never skip simmering the brats in beer. It keeps them juicy and infuses flavor. The grill is for texture, not cooking.
- Cheese Brats: For an even more Wisconsin experience, use cheddar-stuffed bratwurst.
- Apple in Sauerkraut: Diced apple (or a spoonful of apple jelly) cuts the tang of the sauerkraut and adds subtle sweetness. This is a German-Midwest tradition.
- Hard Rolls Only: Wisconsin brats are served on hard rolls or semmel buns, not soft hotdog buns. The roll should have structure and a slight chew.
- Leftovers: Chop leftover brats and add them to scrambled eggs, mac and cheese, or potato soup.

## Did You Know?

> Wisconsin's love affair with bratwurst began in the 1800s when German immigrants settled in Milwaukee, Sheboygan, and surrounding areas. Butchers like Usinger's (est. 1880) and Johnsonville (est. 1945) turned bratwurst into a regional icon. Today, Wisconsin consumes more brats per capita than any other state.

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> The tradition of boiling brats in beer before grilling became standard practice at Lambeau Field tailgates in the 1960s. The method keeps the sausages moist while adding flavor from the beer and onions. The final char on the grill adds texture and a smoky crust. It's a two-step process that Wisconsin takes seriously.

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> Sheboygan calls itself the "Bratwurst Capital of the World" and holds an annual Bratwurst Festival. Milwaukee's State Fair sells more than 200,000 brats during its 11-day run. And at Lambeau Field, you're not a real Packers fan unless you've eaten a brat in the parking lot at 8 a.m. in subzero temperatures.

\* Photography note: Tailgate realism. A charred bratwurst in a hard roll on a paper plate, piled high with sauerkraut and caramelized onions, a squiggle of yellow mustard. Background: a Weber grill with more brats, a cooler, and a blurred Wisconsin flag or Packers logo. Shot outdoors in natural afternoon light. The vibe should be parking lot, not fine dining.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5

(Will bring a cooler full of brats, beer, and buns to any tailgate, cookout, or neighborhood gathering. No invitation required.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Lambeau Field parking lot at 9 a.m., a cooler full of beer, a Packers jersey, and the smell of charcoal smoke drifting across the blacktop.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Bratwurst With Sauerkraut**

> "Grandma Schmidt, who grew up in Sheboygan, always added a spoonful of apple jelly to the sauerkraut while it simmered. 'Cuts the sour, makes it sing,' she'd say with a wink. She also insisted on using cheap beer for boiling — 'Miller High Life or nothing. Save the good beer for drinking.' And if anyone put ketchup on a brat at her table, they were politely asked to leave."



## Chicago Deep Dish Pizza

*Chicago, Illinois*

*Is it a pizza or a cheese-and-tomato pie? Chicagoans don't care what you call it, as long as you acknowledge it's magnificent. A buttery, flaky crust built up the sides of a deep pan, loaded with mozzarella, toppings, and a thick layer of crushed tomato sauce on top. Yes, on top. That's the point.*

## Ingredients

- Crust
- 3¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ cup yellow cornmeal
- 1¼ teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2¼ teaspoons instant yeast (1 packet)
- 1¼ cups warm water (110°F)
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Filling
- 1½ lbs low-moisture whole-milk mozzarella, sliced ¼-inch thick (not shredded)
- 1 lb Italian sausage, casings removed, browned and drained
- ½ cup grated Parmesan
- Sauce
- 1 can (28 oz) whole San Marzano tomatoes, crushed by hand
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon sugar

## Instructions

- 1 Make the dough:** Combine flour, cornmeal, salt, and sugar. Add yeast to warm water, let bloom 5 minutes. Pour into flour mixture with melted butter and olive oil. Mix until a soft, slightly sticky dough forms. Knead 5 minutes. Place in an oiled bowl, cover, and let rise 1½–2 hours until doubled.
- 2 Make the sauce:** Heat olive oil in a saucepan. Sauté garlic 30 seconds. Add crushed tomatoes, oregano, basil, salt, pepper flakes, and sugar. Simmer 20–30 minutes until thickened. Let cool.
- 3 Prep the pan:** Generously butter a 12-inch deep-dish pizza pan or 10-inch cast iron skillet. Press dough into the pan, building it up the sides at least 1½ inches.
- 4 Layer (this order matters):**
- 5** - Mozzarella slices directly on the dough (this protects the crust from getting soggy)
- 6** - Browned sausage
- 7** - Sauce spread over the top
- 8** - Parmesan sprinkled over sauce
- 9 Bake** at 425°F (220°C) for 30–35 minutes until crust is deep golden and sauce is bubbling.
- 10 Rest** 10 minutes in the pan before slicing. (Seriously. Let it set or it'll be a beautiful disaster.)

## At A Glance

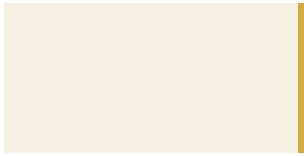
Servings	6–8
Prep Time	30 minutes + 2 hours rise
Cook Time	30–35 minutes
Difficulty	Intermediate
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- The cheese goes UNDER the sauce. This is non-negotiable in Chicago. The thick sauce layer on top is what makes it deep dish.
- Cornmeal is key: It gives the crust that distinctive sandy, crunchy texture.
- Cast iron magic: A well-seasoned cast iron skillet makes exceptional deep dish — the butter crisps the crust edges beautifully.
- Sausage technique: Press raw Italian sausage into a thin patty and lay it over the cheese for an authentic pizzeria-style layer.
- Patience: This pizza needs 10 minutes to rest or it \*will\* fall apart when you cut it.

## Did You Know?

The origin of Chicago deep dish is hotly debated. Most credit Ike Sewell and Ric Riccardo, who opened Pizzeria Uno in 1943. But some historians argue it was actually Uno's original pizza chef, Rudy Malnati, whose family would go on to found the legendary Lou Malnati's Pizzeria. Regardless of who invented it, deep dish became Chicago's culinary calling card. When New York comedian Jon Stewart famously called it "an above-ground marinara swimming pool for rats," Chicago's response was essentially: "We know. It's delicious. Have another slice."



\* Photography note: Modern editorial style — overhead shot of the whole pizza in its cast iron pan, one slice pulled away showing the cheese stretch, on a dark marble surface. Dramatic side lighting.\*



## Chicago Italian Beef

*Chicago, Illinois*

*Thin-sliced, slow-simmered beef piled into a crusty Italian roll, drenched in savory jus, and crowned with hot giardiniera — this is Chicago's great blue-collar masterpiece, the sandwich that demands you lean forward over the counter and let the juices run down your forearms.*

## Ingredients

- The Beef
- 1 boneless beef chuck roast (4–5 pounds)
- 4 cups beef broth
- 2 cups water
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- 1 tablespoon dried basil
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 5 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tablespoon Italian seasoning
- For Serving
- 8–10 crusty Italian rolls (look for long, sturdy rolls with a firm crust — French bread works in a pinch)
- Hot giardiniera (Chicago-style, chunky)
- Sweet peppers (roasted Italian sweet peppers in oil)
- Additional jus for dipping

## Instructions

- 1 Season the roast.** Combine oregano, basil, red pepper flakes, garlic powder, onion powder, black pepper, salt, thyme, and Italian seasoning in a small bowl. Rub the spice mixture all over the beef chuck roast, pressing it into the meat.
- 2 Sear the beef.** Heat a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat with a thin film of oil. Sear the roast on all sides until deeply browned, about 3–4 minutes per side. This builds flavor in the jus.
- 3 Build the braising liquid.** Add the smashed garlic and bay leaf to the pot. Pour in the beef broth and water. The liquid should come about  $\frac{3}{4}$  up the sides of the roast. Bring to a boil.
- 4 Braise low and slow.** Cover the Dutch oven and transfer to a 300°F oven. Braise for 3½ to 4 hours, until the beef is very tender and pulls apart easily with a fork.
- 5 Slice the beef.** Remove the roast to a cutting board and let it rest 10 minutes. Slice against the grain as thinly as you possibly can — this is crucial. A sharp carving knife or electric knife helps. The slices should be almost translucent.
- 6 Make the jus.** Strain the braising liquid through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean saucepan. Skim excess fat from the surface. Taste and adjust seasoning. Keep the jus at a low simmer.
- 7 Dunk the beef.** Return the sliced beef to the warm jus and let it soak for at least 5 minutes. The beef should absorb the seasoned broth.
- 8 Build the sandwich.** Split an Italian roll (don't fully separate the halves). Using tongs, pile the beef high — be generous. Spoon a little extra jus over the meat.
- 9 Choose your toppings:**
- 10 - Dry:** No extra jus
- 11 - Wet:** Jus ladled over the sandwich
- 12 - Dipped:** The whole sandwich dunked in jus (the true Chicago way)
- 13** Top with hot giardiniera, sweet peppers, or both ("combo").
- 14 Serve immediately** with extra jus on the side for dipping. Napkins — many napkins — are not optional.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8–10 sandwiches
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	3½–4 hours
Total Time	4 hours 20 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Giardiniera is non-negotiable. The spicy, vinegary crunch of Chicago-style giardiniera is what makes this sandwich sing. Look for it at Italian delis or make your own.
- Slow Cooker Method: Season and sear the beef, then transfer to a slow cooker with the broth and seasonings. Cook on low for 8–10 hours.

- The Right Bread: A true Italian beef roll has a firm crust that can hold up to being dipped in jus without completely disintegrating, but a soft interior that absorbs the liquid. Turano and Gonnella are the classic Chicago bakeries.
- Combo Sandwich: Many Chicago beef stands offer a "combo" — Italian beef plus an Italian sausage link on the same roll. It's excessive and perfect.
- Don't Skip the Dip: Ordering it "dipped" means the entire assembled sandwich is briefly submerged in jus. It's messy, magnificent, and mandatory for the full experience.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Italian beef traces back to the 1930s Italian immigrant community on Chicago's South Side. During the Depression, thinly slicing beef and stretching it with seasoned broth was a way to feed more people at weddings and community gatherings — a practice called "peanut weddings" where the hosts served inexpensive food to accommodate hundreds of guests. Al's #1 Italian Beef (opened 1938) and Mr. Beef on Orleans both claim origin-story status. Today, Italian beef is as essential to Chicago's identity as deep dish pizza, and locals will argue about their preferred stand with equal passion. The 2022 TV show *\*The Bear\** brought national attention to the sandwich, but Chicagoans have known the truth all along.

\* Photography note: A juicy Italian beef sandwich on butcher paper, sliced open to show the piled-high thin beef glistening with jus. A ramekin of hot giardiniera sits alongside, its oil glistening. Colorful sweet peppers visible. Shot at a slight angle on a worn deli counter. Warm, slightly gritty urban lighting.\*



## Chicago-Style Hot Dog

*Chicago, Illinois — Vienna Beef Territory*

*An all-beef frankfurter nestled in a steamed poppy seed bun, dragged through the garden with yellow mustard, bright green relish, chopped onion, tomato wedges, a dill pickle spear, sport peppers, and a dash of celery salt. Everything but ketchup. **\*\*Never ketchup.\*\*** This isn't a suggestion. This is constitutional law in Chicago.*

## Ingredients

- The Dog
- 8 all-beef hot dogs (Vienna Beef if you can get them — this is the canonical Chicago choice)
- 8 poppy seed hot dog buns (steamed, not toasted)
- The Seven Toppings (In Order)
  1. Yellow mustard
  2. Sweet neon-green relish (Chicago-style — the unnaturally green kind)
  3. Chopped white onion
  4. 2 ripe tomatoes, cut into wedges
  5. 8 dill pickle spears
  6. 16 sport peppers (2 per dog)
  7. Celery salt
- Absolutely NOT
- ~~Ketchup~~. Don't even think about it.

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook the dogs.** Bring a pot of water to a gentle boil, reduce to a simmer, and add the hot dogs. Cook for 4–5 minutes until heated through and plump. (Alternatively, grill them — Chicagoans debate this, but both methods are accepted.) Do not microwave them. We're not animals.
- 2 **Steam the buns.** While the dogs cook, steam the poppy seed buns. You can set them over the simmering water on a steamer basket, wrap them in a damp paper towel and microwave for 15 seconds, or briefly warm them in a low oven wrapped in foil. The bun should be warm and soft, not toasted. Toasting the bun is a New York thing. We don't do that here.
- 3 **Assemble in order.** Place a hot dog in each bun. Then, and this part matters:
  - 4 - First: A stripe of yellow mustard down one side of the dog.
  - 5 - Second: Sweet green relish down the other side.
  - 6 - Third: Chopped white onion, scattered generously.
  - 7 - Fourth: Two tomato wedges, tucked between the dog and the bun.
  - 8 - Fifth: A dill pickle spear, laid lengthwise alongside the dog.
  - 9 - Sixth: Two sport peppers, placed on top.
  - 10 - Seventh: A generous dash of celery salt over the whole thing.
- 11 **Eat immediately.** Do not put this on a plate with a knife and fork. Hold it with two hands. Accept the mess. This is the Chicago way.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8 hot dogs
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes
Total Time	25 minutes
Difficulty	Easy (assembly is the hard part)
Category	Mains

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Perfectly welcome at a cookout, but this is street food — it's meant to be eaten standing up at a neon-lit stand, dripping onto your shirt.

## Tips & Variations

- Vienna Beef or Bust: In Chicago, Vienna Beef is the standard. If you're outside Chicago and can't get them, look for any all-beef, natural-casing hot dog with good snap. Nathan's works. Hebrew National works. A turkey dog does not work. Go home.

- The Neon Relish: Chicago-style relish is sweet pickle relish dyed an almost radioactive green. It's available online and at specialty stores. Regular sweet relish works flavor-wise, but the color won't be right, and Chicagoans will know.

- Sport Peppers: These small, pickled, moderately hot peppers are essential. They're sold in jars (Marconi and Vienna brands are common). If you truly can't find them, pepperoncini are a passable substitute — but it's not the same. The sport pepper has a specific vinegary heat that defines the Chicago dog.
- The Ketchup Rule: Look, if you're over the age of 12, do not put ketchup on a Chicago-style hot dog. This is not snobbery. It's civic duty. The sweetness of ketchup overwhelms the carefully balanced flavors of the seven toppings. If you want ketchup, that's fine — just don't call it a Chicago dog. And maybe don't mention it to anyone from Chicago.
- Char Dog Variation: Some stands char-grill the dog and split it down the middle. This gives you a snappier, smokier dog that holds up to the mountain of toppings. Perfectly legitimate.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"The tomato wedges should be placed between the dog and the bun, not on top. They act as a structural support for everything else. Also, use the celery salt last — it ties everything together the way salt ties together any dish. Most people undershake. Don't undershake."\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Maxwell Street Polish sausage for your other hand, a bag of Jay's hot stuff potato chips, standing on a sidewalk at 11 PM after a Cubs loss, and the absolute certainty that this is the greatest hot dog in America (New York is wrong, and deep down they know it).

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### **Did You Know?**

> The Chicago-style hot dog was born during the Great Depression, when pushcart vendors — many of them Greek and Eastern European immigrants — sold cheap all-beef frankfurters loaded with free vegetable toppings to make the meal seem more substantial. The generous pile of onions, tomatoes, relish, and pickles turned a five-cent hot dog into a complete meal for people who couldn't afford much else. The Vienna Beef company, founded in 1893 by Austrian-Hungarian immigrants Emil Reichel and Sam Ladany (who debuted their sausages at the Chicago World's Fair), became the city's dominant hot dog brand. By mid-century, the "Chicago-style" formula had codified into the seven-topping standard we know today. There are an estimated 1,800 hot dog stands in Chicago — more than the city's McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's locations combined. The hot dog isn't just Chicago food. It's Chicago infrastructure.

\* Photography note: A Chicago dog in all its glory — the neon green relish, the yellow mustard stripe, the bright red tomato wedges, the pickle spear running the length of the bun, the sport peppers perched on top, celery salt visible, poppy seed bun — in a red-and-white checkered paper boat. Maybe a hand holding it with the Chicago skyline soft in the background. Or a neon hot dog stand sign. The colors should pop. This is not a subtle food.\*



# Chicken and Dumplings

*Ohio / Indiana (Farmhouse Tradition)*

*This isn't soup. This isn't stew. It's somewhere in between, thick and cloudy with schmaltz and starch, studded with chunks of tender chicken and topped with dumplings that are either pillowy clouds or dense sinkers depending on whose grandmother is making them. In Ohio farmhouses and Indiana kitchens, this is what you make when someone is sick, sad, or it's Wednesday. No one argues about the weather when there's chicken and dumplings on the table.*

## Ingredients

- For the Chicken:
- 1 whole chicken (3-4 lbs), cut into pieces (or 2 lbs bone-in thighs and breasts)
- 8 cups (1.9L) cold water
- 1 large yellow onion, quartered
- 2 large carrots, roughly chopped
- 2 celery stalks with leaves, roughly chopped
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tsp whole black peppercorns
- Salt to taste
- For the Dumplings:
- 2 cups (250g) all-purpose flour
- 1 tbsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 3 tbsp (45g) cold butter, cubed
- 1 cup (240ml) whole milk
- 2 tbsp fresh parsley, chopped (optional, for flecks of green)
- To Finish:
- 3 tbsp (45g) butter
- ½ cup (40g) all-purpose flour (for thickening)
- 1 cup (240ml) heavy cream or half-and-half
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Fresh parsley for garnish

## Instructions

- 1 Make the Chicken Broth:** Place the chicken pieces in a large Dutch oven or stockpot. Add the water, onion, carrots, celery, bay leaves, and peppercorns. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce to a simmer. Skim off any foam that rises. Simmer partially covered for 35-40 minutes, until the chicken is cooked through and nearly falling off the bone.
- 2 Pull the Chicken:** Remove chicken pieces and set aside to cool slightly. Strain the broth through a fine-mesh sieve, discarding the vegetables and aromatics. You should have about 6-7 cups of broth. Return the broth to the pot. When the chicken is cool enough to handle, shred the meat, discarding skin and bones. Set aside.
- 3 Thicken the Broth:** Melt 3 tbsp butter in the broth pot over medium heat. Whisk in ½ cup flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 2-3 minutes until the mixture turns golden and smells toasted (this is a roux). Slowly whisk in the strained broth, stirring constantly to avoid lumps. Bring to a simmer. The broth will thicken as it heats. Stir in the heavy cream. Season generously with salt and pepper.
- 4 Make the Dumplings:** In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, and salt. Cut in the cold butter using a pastry cutter or your fingers until the mixture looks like coarse crumbs. Add the milk and parsley (if using) and stir with a fork just until a shaggy dough forms. Do not overmix or your dumplings will be tough. The dough should be sticky and rough.
- 5 Cook the Dumplings:** Bring the thickened broth to a gentle boil. Drop heaping spoonfuls of dumpling dough onto the surface of the simmering broth, spacing them slightly apart. You should get about 10-12 dumplings. Cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid. **\*\*Do not lift the lid.\*\*** Reduce heat to medium-low and cook for 15 minutes. The dumplings will puff and steam.
- 6 Add Chicken & Serve:** After 15 minutes, gently stir the shredded chicken back into the pot, nestling it around the dumplings. Let it heat through for 2-3 minutes. Taste and adjust seasoning. Ladle into deep bowls, making sure everyone gets dumplings. Garnish with parsley if you're feeling fancy.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8 (or 4 if they've been outside all day)
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	50 minutes
Total Time	70 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Dumpling Texture: For fluffy, biscuit-like dumplings, follow the recipe exactly and don't overmix. For denser, chewier "sinkers" (the old-school style), use less baking powder (1 tsp instead of 1 tbsp) and knead the dough a bit.
- Shortcut Version: Use a rotisserie chicken and store-bought chicken broth. You'll lose some soul, but you'll save an hour.
- Vegetable Add-Ins: Frozen peas or corn can be stirred in with the chicken at the end. Some folks add diced potatoes to the broth before thickening.

- The Lid Rule: Lifting the lid while the dumplings cook releases the steam and results in sad, dense dumplings. Resist the urge.

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### Did You Know?

> Chicken and dumplings is one of those dishes that arrived in the Midwest with settlers from the South and Appalachia, where it was a way to stretch a single chicken into a meal for a large family. In Ohio and Indiana, farm wives would simmer a tough old laying hen for hours until it was tender, then drop in dumplings made from pantry staples — flour, baking powder, and milk or buttermilk.

>

> The dish became a Sunday staple and a sick-day cure-all. Church ladies brought it to new mothers. Neighbors delivered it in Mason jars after funerals. It's utilitarian comfort food — not fancy, not Instagrammable, but undeniably effective at making you feel like someone cares.

>

> There are two warring dumpling camps in the Midwest: fluffy (made with baking powder, light and cake-like) and flat (rolled thin and cut into strips, more noodle than cloud). Ohio tends toward fluffy. Southern Indiana leans flat. Both are correct. Both will be defended at potlucks.

\* Photography note: Farmhouse realism. A deep white ceramic bowl filled with chicken and dumplings, thick broth clinging to torn pieces of chicken and fluffy dumplings. A silver spoon rests in the bowl. Shot on a worn wooden table with a faded floral tablecloth, natural window light from the side, slightly cool tones. A Mason jar of water and a crumpled linen napkin in the background. Steam optional but encouraged.\*

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### Midwest Nice Rating

5/5

(Will bring this to your house if you're sick, leave it on the porch with reheating instructions, and text you later to make sure you ate it.)

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### Pairs Well With

A January blizzard, a dog sleeping by the woodstove, the quiet of a farmhouse kitchen after everyone else has gone to bed, and the knowledge that tomorrow's leftovers will taste even better.

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### Grandma's Secret: Chicken And Dumplings

> "Grandma Agnes swore the secret was using an old hen — a laying chicken past its prime — and simmering it for two full hours until the broth was golden and thick. 'Young chickens don't have enough flavor,' she'd insist, 'and store-bought broth tastes like dishwater.' She also added a fistful of fresh parsley stems (not the leaves) to the broth while it cooked, claiming it made the whole pot taste 'greener.' No one argued."



# Chicken Fried Steak

*Kansas*

*A Southern-inspired comfort food that found a firm foothold in the heartland, featuring a tenderized steak coated in seasoned flour, pan-fried to a golden crisp, and smothered in creamy white gravy.*

## Ingredients

- 4 (4-6 oz / 113-170g each) beef cube steaks (or top round, tenderized)
- 1.5 cups all-purpose flour, divided
- 1 tsp salt, plus more for seasoning
- 1 tsp black pepper, plus more for seasoning
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp onion powder
- ¼ tsp cayenne pepper (optional, for a subtle kick)
- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup milk (whole or 2%)
- 4-6 cups vegetable oil or shortening, for frying
- For the Cream Gravy:
  - ¼ cup pan drippings from frying (or use butter/oil)
  - ¼ cup all-purpose flour
  - 2 cups milk (whole or 2%), warmed
  - Salt and black pepper to taste
  - Pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare Steak:** Pat the cube steaks dry with paper towels. Season both sides generously with salt and black pepper. If using top round, pound it to about ¼-inch thickness.
- 2 **Set Up Breading Station:** Set up three shallow dishes. In the first dish, whisk together 1 cup of flour, 1 tsp salt, 1 tsp black pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, and cayenne pepper (if using). In the second dish, whisk together the eggs and ½ cup milk. In the third dish, place the remaining ½ cup of flour.
- 3 **Dredge Steaks:** Dredge each steak first in the seasoned flour, shaking off excess. Then dip it into the egg wash, ensuring it's fully coated. Finally, return it to the seasoned flour for a second coating, pressing gently to adhere the breading. Place breaded steaks on a wire rack while you prepare the others.
- 4 **Heat Oil:** In a large, heavy-bottomed skillet (preferably cast iron), add vegetable oil or shortening to a depth of about 1 inch. Heat over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F (175°C).
- 5 **Fry Steaks:** Carefully place 1-2 breaded steaks into the hot oil (do not overcrowd the pan). Fry for 3-5 minutes per side, or until deeply golden brown and crispy. The internal temperature should reach 145°F (63°C).
- 6 **Drain:** Using tongs, remove the fried steaks and place them on a clean wire rack set over paper towels to drain excess oil. Keep warm in a low oven (200°F / 95°C) while you make the gravy.
- 7 **Make Cream Gravy:** Carefully pour off all but ¼ cup of the pan drippings from the skillet. Return the skillet to medium heat. Whisk in ¼ cup flour and cook for 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until a light golden roux forms. Slowly whisk in the warmed milk, stirring constantly to prevent lumps. Bring the gravy to a simmer, whisking until it thickens. Season with salt, pepper, and a pinch of cayenne pepper (if using) to taste.
- 8 **Serve:** Serve the hot, crispy chicken fried steaks immediately, smothered generously with the warm cream gravy. Excellent with mashed potatoes and green beans.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	20-25 minutes
Total Time	40-45 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- For extra tender steak, pound the cube steaks even thinner before breading.
- Use bacon fat instead of vegetable oil for frying for an extra layer of savory flavor.
- For spicier gravy, add a dash of hot sauce or more cayenne pepper.
- Serve with a side of creamy mashed potatoes and steamed green beans or corn for a classic Southern-Midwestern meal.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Chicken Fried Steak, despite its name, contains no chicken. The "chicken fried" refers to the cooking method, which mimics the technique used for frying chicken. While often associated with Southern cuisine, this hearty dish is a beloved staple across the Plains states, including Kansas, where it provides comforting, filling fare for hardworking ranchers and families. It's a testament to resourceful cooking, taking an inexpensive cut of beef and transforming it into a tender, flavorful meal.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A golden-brown, crispy chicken fried steak, generously smothered in white cream gravy, served on a classic white diner plate. A side of fluffy mashed potatoes and vibrant green beans complete the plate. Set on a distressed wooden table with soft, warm overhead lighting. A fork should be poised to cut into the steak.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will serve this hearty meal to anyone who shows up unannounced, especially after a long day of farm work.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A long day of honest work, a classic country music playlist, and a tall glass of iced tea on the porch.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Chicken Fried Steak**

> "Grandma Loretta swore by soaking her cube steaks in buttermilk for at least an hour (or even overnight!) before breading. 'It makes 'em so tender,' she'd declare, 'you'll think you're eating prime rib, bless your heart!'"



# Country Fried Chicken

*Indiana, US*

*A beloved Midwestern staple, Country Fried Chicken features tender chicken pieces coated in a seasoned, crispy crust, pan-fried to golden perfection and often served with a generous helping of creamy gravy.*

## Ingredients

- 2-3 lbs (900g-1.3kg) bone-in, skin-on chicken pieces (drumsticks, thighs, breasts, wings)
- 2 cups (480ml) buttermilk
- 1 tsp hot sauce (optional, for flavor, not heat)
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp cornstarch (for extra crispiness)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp onion powder
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- ½ tsp cayenne pepper (optional, for a kick)
- 4-6 cups vegetable oil or shortening, for frying

## Instructions

- 1 Marinate Chicken:** In a large bowl, combine buttermilk and hot sauce (if using). Add chicken pieces, ensuring they are fully submerged. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes, or up to 2 hours, to tenderize and add flavor.
- 2 Prepare Breading:** In a shallow dish or a large zip-top bag, whisk together flour, cornstarch, salt, black pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, smoked paprika, and cayenne pepper (if using).
- 3 Bread Chicken:** Remove chicken pieces from the buttermilk, allowing excess to drip off. Do not rinse. Dredge each piece thoroughly in the seasoned flour mixture, pressing to ensure a thick, even coating. Place breaded chicken on a wire rack set over a baking sheet.
- 4 Heat Oil:** In a large, heavy-bottomed skillet (preferably cast iron) or Dutch oven, add vegetable oil or shortening to a depth of about 1.5-2 inches. Heat over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F (175°C). Use a deep-fry thermometer to monitor the temperature.
- 5 Fry Chicken:** Carefully place chicken pieces into the hot oil, skin-side down first (do not overcrowd the pan; fry in batches). Fry for 6-8 minutes per side, turning with tongs, until golden brown.
- 6 Cook Through:** Reduce heat to medium-low, cover the skillet, and continue to cook for an additional 10-15 minutes, flipping once or twice, until the chicken is cooked through and the internal temperature reaches 165°F (74°C) at the thickest part.
- 7 Drain & Serve:** Remove fried chicken from the skillet and place on a clean wire rack set over paper towels to drain excess oil. Let rest for a few minutes. Serve hot, often with country gravy.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4-6
Prep Time	20 minutes (plus 30 min - 2 hours marinating)
Cook Time	25-30 minutes
Total Time	45-50 minutes (plus marinating)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- For extra crispy chicken, you can do a double-dredge: after the first flour coating, dip back into a shallow bowl of buttermilk, then dredge in flour again.
- Use a mix of dark and white meat chicken pieces to cater to different preferences.
- If the chicken is browning too quickly, lower the heat slightly. If it's not browning, increase the heat. Maintaining a consistent oil temperature is key.
- Serve with a side of creamy mashed potatoes, green beans, or coleslaw for a classic Midwestern meal.

## Did You Know?

> Country Fried Chicken, while having roots across the American South, found its way into the heart of the Midwest, becoming a cherished dish particularly in states like Indiana. It's a staple at Sunday

dinners, family reunions, and community events, symbolizing the region's love for hearty, honest, and comforting home-cooked meals. The simple yet satisfying combination of crispy coating and juicy chicken embodies the generous and unpretentious spirit of Midwestern cuisine.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A platter piled high with golden-brown, crispy country fried chicken pieces, glistening and hot. A small bowl of creamy white country gravy is nearby. Set on a well-worn wooden table, perhaps with a classic checkered tablecloth, bathed in soft, inviting natural light. Focus on the appealing crispiness of the chicken.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5 (Will make a big batch for guests and subtly encourage you to take home leftovers for lunch tomorrow.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A Sunday family dinner after church, a warm summer evening on the porch, and the happy sounds of conversation and clinking glasses.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Country Fried Chicken**

> "Grandma Irene always added a secret spoonful of sugar (just a teaspoon!) to her flour dredge. 'It helps the chicken get that perfect golden crust,' she'd whisper, 'and makes it extra crispy, a little trick no one ever guesses!'"



## Country Meatloaf

*Midwest US (Depression-Era Legacy)*

*Meatloaf is what happens when you need to feed six people with one pound of ground beef and whatever's in the pantry. It's the culinary descendant of economic anxiety, stretched with breadcrumbs, eggs, and vegetables, then shellacked with a ketchup glaze and baked until it smells like Sunday dinner. In the Midwest, it never went out of style because it was never about style. It was about making something out of not much, and making it taste like home.*

## Ingredients

- For the Loaf:
  - 2 lbs (900g) ground beef (80/20 — don't use lean, you need the fat)
  - 1 cup plain breadcrumbs or crushed saltines (about 30 crackers)
  - ½ cup whole milk
  - 1 large yellow onion, finely diced
  - ½ green bell pepper, finely diced (optional, but traditional)
  - 2 large eggs, beaten
  - 3 cloves garlic, minced
  - 2 tsp Worcestershire sauce
  - 1 tsp salt
  - 1 tsp black pepper
  - ½ tsp dried thyme
  - ¼ tsp dried sage or poultry seasoning
- For the Glaze:
  - ¾ cup ketchup (Heinz preferred, but store-brand works)
  - 3 tbsp brown sugar, packed
  - 2 tbsp yellow mustard
  - 1 tbsp apple cider vinegar
  - ½ tsp smoked paprika (optional, for depth)

## Instructions

- 1 Preheat & Prep:** Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or lightly grease a 9x5-inch loaf pan. (Free-form on a sheet is traditional and gives you more glaze coverage; a loaf pan is tidier.)
- 2 Soak the Breadcrumbs:** In a small bowl, pour the milk over the breadcrumbs and let sit for 5 minutes until the crumbs absorb the liquid and turn into a paste. This is your binder.
- 3 Mix the Meatloaf:** In a large bowl, combine the ground beef, soaked breadcrumbs, onion, bell pepper, eggs, garlic, Worcestershire, salt, pepper, thyme, and sage. Use your hands to mix gently but thoroughly until everything is evenly distributed. Don't overwork it or the loaf will be dense and rubbery.
- 4 Shape the Loaf:** Turn the mixture out onto the prepared baking sheet and form it into a loaf shape, about 9 inches long and 5 inches wide. Pat the top smooth. If using a loaf pan, press the mixture in evenly and smooth the top.
- 5 Make the Glaze:** In a small bowl, whisk together the ketchup, brown sugar, mustard, vinegar, and smoked paprika until smooth.
- 6 First Bake:** Bake the meatloaf for 45 minutes.
- 7 Glaze & Finish:** Remove from the oven and brush or spoon half the glaze over the top and sides. Return to the oven and bake for another 20-25 minutes, until the internal temperature reaches 160°F (71°C) and the glaze is sticky and caramelized. Brush with the remaining glaze during the last 10 minutes if you want extra shine.
- 8 Rest & Slice:** Let the meatloaf rest for 10 minutes before slicing. This keeps it from falling apart and lets the juices settle. Serve in thick slices.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8 (or 4 if they've been working outside)
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	70 minutes
Total Time	90 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- **Crushed Crackers:** Saltines or Ritz crackers work just as well as breadcrumbs and add a subtle buttery flavor. This is the Depression-era method.
- **The Loaf Pan Debate:** A loaf pan keeps it compact and tidy, but a free-form loaf on a baking sheet lets the fat drip away and gives you more glaze surface area. Choose your ancestor's method.
- **Vegetable Add-Ins:** Grated carrot, zucchini, or even a raw potato (Grandma Rose's trick) can be mixed in for moisture and stealth nutrition.
- **Leftovers:** Cold meatloaf sandwiches on white bread with yellow mustard are peak Midwestern lunch. Don't argue with tradition.

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### Did You Know?

> Meatloaf as we know it became an American staple during the Great Depression, when cooks needed to stretch expensive ground meat as far as possible. Breadcrumbs, oatmeal, crackers — anything that added bulk without adding cost. The Midwest embraced it because it was economical, forgiving, and used ingredients already in the pantry.

>

> The ketchup glaze is a post-WWII innovation, when bottled ketchup became cheap and ubiquitous. Before that, meatloaf was often topped with tomato paste or nothing at all. The sweet-tangy glaze became iconic in the 1950s and '60s, appearing in church cookbooks, community fundraisers, and Sunday dinner tables across the heartland.

>

> Meatloaf never went upscale. It stayed humble. You won't find it on trendy restaurant menus. It lives in casserole dishes, church basement potlucks, and weeknight family dinners. It's not fancy. It doesn't need to be.

\* Photography note: No frills. A thick slice of meatloaf on a plain white plate with a scoop of mashed potatoes and a pile of green beans. The glaze should be glossy and slightly sticky. Shot on a Formica table or faded tablecloth, with overhead incandescent lighting that casts a warm, slightly yellow glow. A scratched fork and a glass of milk in the background. This should look like 1975.\*

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### Midwest Nice Rating

5/5

(Will bring this to your house if you just moved in, had a baby, or experienced a death in the family. It's the universal Midwest gesture of care.)

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### Pairs Well With

A Sunday evening in late autumn, the smell of woodsmoke drifting through the neighborhood, a table set with mismatched plates, and the knowledge that there will be leftovers for tomorrow's lunch.

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### Grandma's Secret: Country Meatloaf

> "Grandma Rose grated half a raw potato into the meat mixture and swore it was the secret to her meatloaf never being dry. 'It keeps everything moist and tender,' she'd say, 'and no one can ever figure out what I did different.' She also used crushed Ritz crackers instead of breadcrumbs because they were cheaper by the sleeve."



## Detroit-Style Coney Dogs

*Detroit, Michigan — Lafayette vs. American, the Eternal Rivalry*

*A natural-casing hot dog buried under a beanless, finely ground beef chili sauce, topped with diced white onion and a stripe of yellow mustard, served in a steamed bun that's already half-disintegrating from the sauce. This is not a neat food. This is a Detroit food. And the only question that matters: Lafayette or American?*

## Ingredients

- The Coney Sauce
- 1 pound ground beef (80/20 — you want some fat)
- 1 cup water
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons yellow mustard
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 1½ teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon salt (adjust to taste)
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional — for a little kick)
- The Dogs
- 8 natural-casing beef hot dogs (Dearborn Brand or Koegel's are the Michigan standard)
- 8 steamed hot dog buns
- Toppings
- Yellow mustard
- 1 medium white onion, finely diced

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the coney sauce.** In a medium saucepan, combine the ground beef and water. Using a potato masher or the back of a wooden spoon, break the beef into very fine, almost paste-like pieces. This is not taco meat — you want the texture to be almost smooth, with no discernible chunks. Some cooks even pulse the raw meat in a food processor first.
- 2 **Simmer.** Bring the beef and water mixture to a simmer over medium heat, continuing to break up the meat as it cooks. Once simmering, add the tomato paste, mustard, chili powder, cumin, paprika, garlic powder, onion powder, salt, pepper, and cayenne if using. Stir to combine.
- 3 **Cook low and slow.** Reduce heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring occasionally. The sauce should reduce and thicken to a consistency that's spoonable but not soupy — it should hold on a hot dog without running off immediately. If it gets too thick, add a splash of water. If it's too thin, keep cooking.
- 4 **Cook the dogs.** While the sauce simmers, boil or griddle your hot dogs until heated through and snappy, about 5 minutes.
- 5 **Steam the buns.** Briefly steam the buns until soft and warm. A steamer basket over boiling water, or wrapping in a damp towel and microwaving for 10 seconds, both work.
- 6 **Assemble.** Place a hot dog in each bun. Ladle a generous amount of coney sauce over the top. Add a stripe of yellow mustard. Finish with a heavy sprinkling of diced white onion. The sauce should be threatening to escape the bun at all times.
- 7 **Eat.** Over the paper, leaning forward, with napkins nearby. This is a two-hander. Accept your fate.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8 coney dogs
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	1 hour (for the sauce)
Total Time	1 hour 15 minutes
Difficulty	Moderate
Category	Mains

## Midwest Nice Rating:

More of a 2 AM institution than a potluck staple. But bring a crockpot of coney sauce to a tailgate and people will remember your name forever.

## Tips & Variations

- The Texture Secret: The coney sauce **MUST** be finely ground — almost a paste. This is what separates Detroit coney sauce from regular chili. If your meat is too chunky after cooking, hit it with an immersion blender for a few pulses.

- Lafayette vs. American: These two legendary coney islands sit literally next to each other in downtown Detroit. Lafayette is cash-only, no-frills, fluorescent-lit chaos. American has been renovated

and accepts credit cards. Both have been there since 1917. The rivalry is real, the debates are intense, and the correct answer is Lafayette. (American fans: see us outside.)

- Flint-Style Coney: If you go north to Flint, Michigan, the coney sauce is drier, grainier, and made with beef heart. It's a completely different animal (literally). Flint coneys use a different hot dog too (Koegel's). Both cities claim the superior coney. Both cities are willing to fight about it.

- No Beans, Ever: There are no beans in coney sauce. This is not negotiable. If your chili has beans, it's chili. If it's on a hot dog with mustard and onion and no beans, it's a coney. The taxonomy is clear.

- Coney Island Connection: Despite the name, Detroit's coney islands were founded by Greek and Macedonian immigrants who may or may not have passed through Coney Island, New York. The connection is more mythological than historical, but it stuck.

> Grandma's Secret: "Simmer the sauce with a beef bouillon cube for deeper flavor. And the onions should be diced so fine they're almost minced — you want onion in every bite, not big chunks you have to bite through."

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### Pairs Well With

An order of chili cheese fries from the same counter, a can of Vernors ginger ale, the last Lions game of the season (pain optional), and the unshakeable belief that whatever coney island \*you\* go to is the correct one.

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### Did You Know?

> Detroit's coney island tradition dates to the early 1900s, when Greek immigrants — many from the same villages in northern Greece and Macedonia — opened small diners serving American-style hot dogs with their own distinctive chili sauce. The word "coney" comes from Coney Island in New York, but the Detroit coney dog bears almost no resemblance to anything you'd find on the East Coast. It's purely a Detroit invention, perfected by Greek-American cooks who adapted Mediterranean spice knowledge to American fast food. At its peak, Detroit had hundreds of coney islands; today there are still dozens. The Lafayette vs. American rivalry is so famous that it's been covered by the \*New York Times\*, \*ESPN\*, and \*No Reservations\*. Anthony Bourdain chose Lafayette. Kid Rock goes to American. Detroit doesn't agree on much, but everyone agrees that a proper coney at 2 AM after a night out is one of life's great experiences.

\* Photography note: Two coney dogs on a paper-lined counter, drowning in the fine-textured chili sauce, yellow mustard stripe, diced onion heaped on top. A worn Formica counter beneath. Maybe a napkin dispenser and a can of Vernors in the shot. The lighting should be slightly harsh — diner fluorescent. This isn't fancy. This is Detroit, and that's the point.\*



## Detroit-Style Pizza

*Detroit, Michigan*

*Thick, airy, and crispy-edged with a caramelized cheese crust that forms where Wisconsin brick cheese meets the blue steel pan — Detroit-style pizza is the Midwest's answer to every other regional pizza, and it might just be the best one.*

## Ingredients

- The Dough
- 2¾ cups bread flour
- 1 teaspoon instant yeast
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 cup warm water (105–110°F)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for the pan
- The Toppings
- 8 ounces Wisconsin brick cheese, cubed into ½-inch pieces (or a 50/50 mix of low-moisture mozzarella and Monterey Jack)
- 4 ounces pepperoni (optional but classic)
- Fresh basil leaves (optional)
- The Red Stripe Sauce
- 1 can (14 ounces) crushed San Marzano tomatoes
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Pinch of red pepper flakes

## Instructions

- 1 Make the dough.** In a large bowl, combine the bread flour, yeast, sugar, and salt. Add the warm water and 2 tablespoons olive oil. Mix until a shaggy dough forms, then knead (by hand or stand mixer with dough hook) for 6–8 minutes until smooth and elastic.
- 2 First rise.** Oil a large bowl, place the dough inside, cover with plastic wrap, and let rise at room temperature for 1½–2 hours until doubled. (For better flavor, refrigerate overnight for a cold rise of 12–14 hours; bring to room temperature 1 hour before shaping.)
- 3 Prepare the pan.** Generously oil a 10x14-inch blue steel Detroit-style pan (or a heavy 9x13-inch baking pan). Transfer the dough to the pan and use your fingers to gently press and stretch it toward the edges. If it springs back, let it rest 10 minutes and try again. The dough should reach all four corners.
- 4 Second rise.** Cover the pan and let the dough rise for 30–45 minutes until puffy.
- 5 Make the sauce.** While the dough rises, combine all sauce ingredients in a small bowl. Stir well. (The sauce goes on TOP of the cheese, in characteristic "racing stripes.")
- 6 Top the pizza.** Preheat oven to 550°F (or as high as it goes). Distribute the cubed cheese evenly over the dough, making sure to push cheese cubes all the way to the edges and into the corners — this creates the signature caramelized cheese crust (the "frico"). Layer pepperoni over the cheese if using.
- 7 Bake.** Bake for 12–15 minutes until the top is deeply golden, the cheese at the edges is dark and crispy, and the bottom is golden brown (lift a corner with a spatula to check).
- 8 Add the sauce stripes.** Remove from the oven. Spoon the sauce in two or three thick stripes across the top of the pizza — this is the "red stripe" that's characteristic of Detroit style. The sauce goes on AFTER baking.
- 9 Rest and serve.** Let the pizza rest in the pan for 3 minutes, then run a thin spatula around the edges to release it. Slide it out onto a cutting board and cut into squares. Top with fresh basil if desired.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4–6
Prep Time	20 minutes + 2–14 hours rise
Cook Time	15 minutes
Total Time	2.5–14.5 hours
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- **The Pan Matters:** A real Detroit-style blue steel pan gives the best crust. Lloyd Pans makes the gold standard. A well-oiled dark metal 9x13 works as a substitute.
- **Brick Cheese:** Wisconsin brick cheese is the authentic choice — it melts beautifully and creates that incredible caramelized edge. If you can't find it, a mix of low-moisture mozzarella and Monterey Jack gets close.
- **Cheese to the Edges:** The most important step. Push cheese all the way into the corners where it meets the pan. The cheese melts against the hot metal and creates the crispy, lacy "frico" crust.

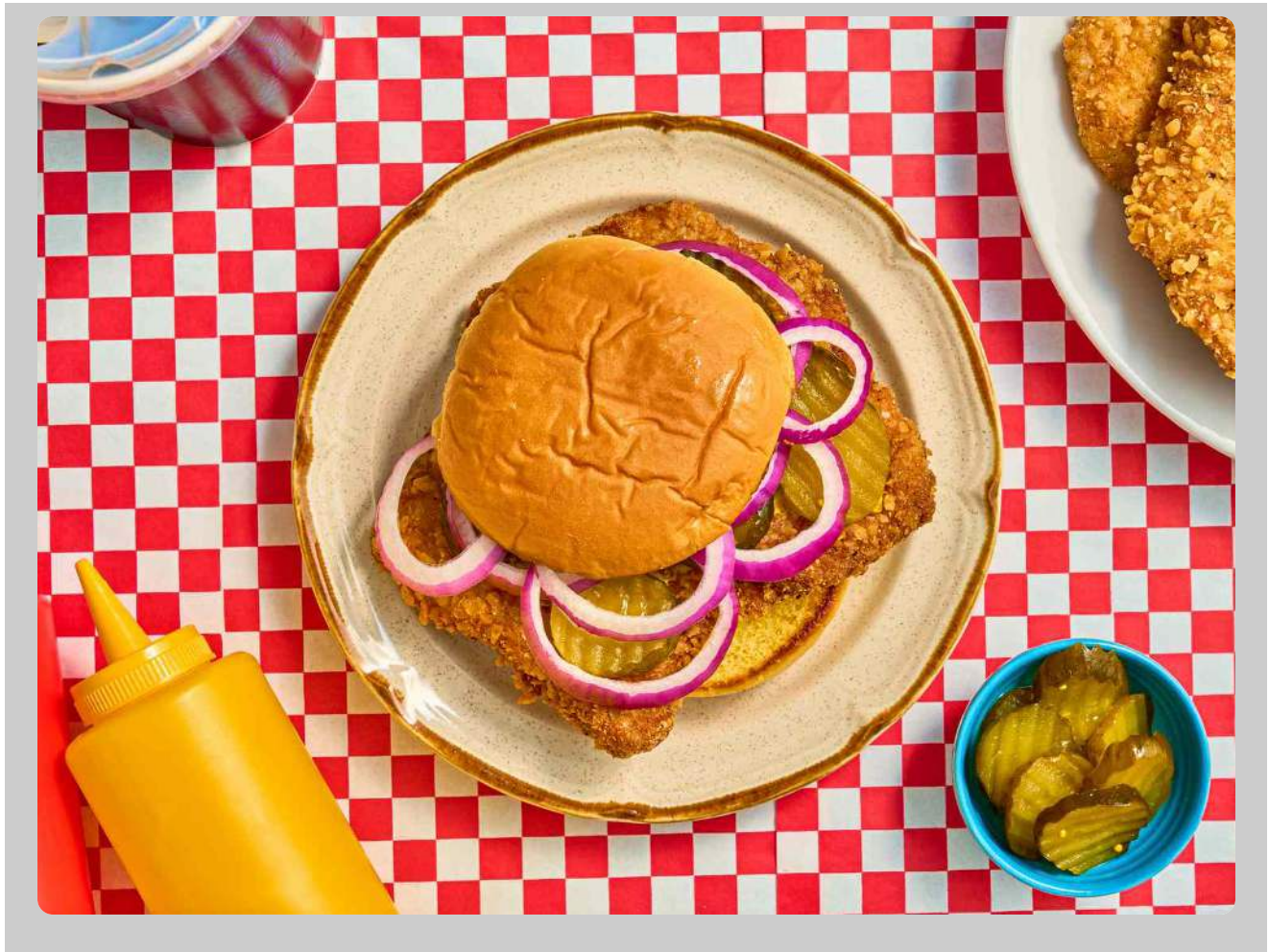
- Supreme Version: Add cooked sausage, green peppers, onions, and mushrooms under the cheese.
- Reheat Method: Reheat in a skillet over medium heat with a lid on — it re-crisps the bottom perfectly.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Detroit-style pizza was born in 1946 at Buddy's Rendezvous (now Buddy's Pizza), when owner Gus Guerra began baking pizza in blue steel utility pans borrowed from the auto industry — the same pans used to hold small parts on the assembly line at Detroit's car factories. The thick, airy, focaccia-like dough, the cheese pushed to the edges, and the sauce applied in "racing stripes" on top became Detroit's signature. For decades, Detroit-style pizza was a local secret, virtually unknown outside Michigan. That changed dramatically in the 2010s when the style exploded nationally, with pizzerias from Portland to Brooklyn putting Detroit-style pies on their menus. Detroiters, who'd been quietly enjoying the best pizza in the Midwest for 75 years, finally felt vindicated.

\* Photography note: A whole Detroit-style pizza in a dark blue steel pan, cut into squares. The red sauce stripes visible on top, the caramelized cheese crust edges dark and crispy. One square being pulled away showing the airy dough and cheese pull. Shot from slightly above on a bar counter. Industrial-meets-comfort aesthetic.\*



# Indiana Breaded Pork Tenderloin Sandwich

*Indiana*

*A pork tenderloin pounded impossibly thin, breaded, and fried until it extends 4 inches past the bun in every direction. The meat-to-bun ratio is absurd. That's the point. In Indiana, the tenderloin is always bigger than the bread, and the bread is just there for moral support.*

## Ingredients

- Pork
- 4 boneless pork loin chops (about 4 oz each, ½-inch thick)
- Vegetable oil for frying (about 1 inch deep in a cast iron skillet)
- Breading Station
  - 1 cup all-purpose flour
  - 1 teaspoon salt
  - ½ teaspoon black pepper
  - ½ teaspoon garlic powder
  - ½ teaspoon paprika
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1½ cups fine dry bread-crumbs or crushed saltine crackers
- To Serve
  - 4 soft hamburger buns (regular-sized — the comical overhang is traditional)
  - Mustard (yellow, the classic choice)
  - Dill pickle slices
  - Sliced onion
  - Lettuce and tomato (optional but common)
  - Mayonnaise (if you're that type)

## Instructions

- 1 **Pound the pork:** Place each chop between plastic wrap. Using a meat mallet, pound aggressively to ¼-inch thickness. They should be roughly 8–10 inches across. (Yes, really. Bigger than your head.)
- 2 **Set up breading station:** Bowl 1: flour mixed with salt, pepper, garlic powder, paprika. Bowl 2: eggs whisked with milk. Bowl 3: breadcrumbs.
- 3 **Bread the pork:** Dredge each tenderloin in flour (shake off excess), dip in egg wash, then press firmly into breadcrumbs on both sides.
- 4 **Fry:** Heat 1 inch of oil in a large cast iron skillet to 350°F (175°C). Fry tenderloins one at a time, 3–4 minutes per side, until deep golden brown and internal temp reaches 145°F.
- 5 **Drain** on a wire rack. Season with a pinch of salt while hot.
- 6 **Assemble:** Place tenderloin on bottom bun (it will hang over dramatically). Add mustard, pickles, onion, and any other toppings. Balance the top bun somewhere in the middle.

## At A Glance

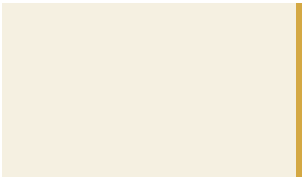
Servings	4
Prep Time	30 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Crackers vs. breadcrumbs: The great Indiana debate. Saltine crackers give a more delicate, shatteringly crispy crust. Breadcrumbs give a thicker, crunchier coating. Both are correct.
- The pounding matters: Don't be gentle. The tenderloin should be uniformly thin. Uneven thickness = uneven cooking.
- Cast iron is king: The heat retention of cast iron gives the best, most even fry.
- Double-dip: For extra crust, go flour → egg → crumbs → egg → crumbs.
- Nick's Kitchen: The legendary tenderloin at Nick's Kitchen in Huntington, Indiana (est. 1908) is considered the gold standard. If you're ever in town, pay your respects.

## Did You Know?

Indiana takes its pork tenderloin sandwich with dead seriousness. The Hoosier tenderloin trail is a real thing — a curated list of restaurants across the state competing for the title of best tenderloin. The sandwich likely evolved from German Schnitzel traditions brought by immigrants in the 1800s. The absurd size isn't an accident; it's a point of pride. A tenderloin that fits inside the bun is considered an embarrassment. Some restaurants serve tenderloins that are literally a foot in diameter, on a standard 4-inch bun. It's magnificent, impractical, and peak Indiana.



\* Photography note: Modern editorial style — shot from slightly above, tenderloin dramatically overhanging the bun on all sides, on a simple white plate. Pickles and mustard visible. Clean background to emphasize the ridiculous proportions.\*



## Iowa Breaded Pork Chop

*Iowa, US*

*A beloved Midwestern classic, the Iowa Breaded Pork Chop features a thick, tender pork chop coated in a seasoned breading and pan-fried to a golden, crispy perfection, often a centerpiece of family meals.*

## Ingredients

- 4 (1-inch thick / 2.5 cm) boneless pork chops (Iowa Chops preferred)
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp onion powder
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup (60ml) milk
- 1.5 cups plain breadcrumbs (Panko for extra crispiness)
- ½ cup vegetable oil or shortening, for frying
- Optional: Fresh parsley, chopped, for garnish
- Optional for serving: Lemon wedges, mashed potatoes, green beans

## Instructions

- 1 Prepare Pork Chops:** Pat pork chops dry with paper towels. Season both sides with a pinch of salt and pepper.
- 2 Set Up Breading Station:** Set up three shallow dishes. In the first dish, whisk together flour, 1 tsp salt, 1 tsp black pepper, garlic powder, and onion powder. In the second dish, whisk together eggs and milk. In the third dish, place the breadcrumbs.
- 3 Bread Pork Chops:** Dredge each pork chop first in the seasoned flour, shaking off excess. Then dip it into the egg mixture, ensuring it's fully coated. Finally, coat thoroughly in the breadcrumbs, pressing gently to adhere. Place breaded chops on a wire rack while you prepare the others.
- 4 Heat Oil:** In a large, heavy-bottomed skillet (preferably cast iron), add vegetable oil or shortening to a depth of about ½ inch. Heat over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F (175°C).
- 5 Fry Pork Chops:** Carefully place 1-2 breaded pork chops into the hot oil (do not overcrowd the pan). Fry for 4-6 minutes per side, or until deeply golden brown and cooked through (internal temperature reaches 145°F / 63°C). Adjust heat as needed to prevent burning.
- 6 Drain & Serve:** Using tongs, remove the fried pork chops and place them on a clean wire rack set over paper towels to drain excess oil. Let rest for a few minutes before serving. Garnish with fresh parsley if desired. Serve immediately with lemon wedges and your favorite sides.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	15-20 minutes
Total Time	35-40 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- For extra tender chops, pound them slightly thinner before breading.
- Add a pinch of cayenne pepper or smoked paprika to the flour mixture for a subtle kick.
- Use a mix of Panko and regular breadcrumbs for a varied texture.
- Serve with a side of creamy mashed potatoes and a fresh green salad for a complete meal.
- Ensure the oil temperature is consistent; too low, and the chops will be greasy; too high, and they will burn before cooking through.

## Did You Know?

> The "Iowa Chop" is not just any pork chop; it's a specific, thick-cut, bone-in loin chop that became a source of pride for Iowa's pork industry. Known for its tenderness and flavor, this breaded and fried version is a quintessential Midwestern comfort food. It celebrates Iowa's rich agricultural heritage as a

leading pork producer, reflecting the region's love for hearty, unpretentious, and satisfying meat-and-potatoes meals that are a staple at family dinners and community gatherings.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A golden-brown, crispy Iowa Breaded Pork Chop, sliced to reveal its juicy interior, served on a classic white diner plate. A side of fluffy mashed potatoes and vibrant green beans complete the plate. Set on a distressed wooden table with soft, warm overhead lighting. A fork should be poised to cut into the chop. The image should convey warmth and home-cooked goodness.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5 (Will happily make a batch for unexpected guests, and probably send them home with leftovers.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A quiet Sunday family dinner, a lively potluck, and sharing stories around a well-loved kitchen table after a long day.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Iowa Breaded Pork Chop**

> "Grandma Johnson always mixed a tiny bit of crushed Ritz crackers into her breadcrumbs. 'It gives 'em an extra buttery, crispy crunch,' she'd wink, 'and nobody ever guesses my secret for that perfect golden crust!'"



## Kansas City BBQ Brisket & Burnt Ends

*Kansas City, Missouri*

*Kansas City doesn't just do barbecue — it **\*is\*** barbecue. Slow-smoked brisket with a thick, sweet, tomato-and-molasses-based sauce, and the legendary burnt ends: the charred, caramelized cubes from the point of the brisket that pit masters used to give away for free. Now they're the most expensive thing on the menu. Welcome to KC.*

## Ingredients

- Brisket
- 1 whole packer brisket (12–15 lbs), fat cap trimmed to ¼ inch
- Yellow mustard (as a binder)
- KC Dry Rub
- ¼ cup paprika
- 3 tablespoons coarse black pepper
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- KC-Style Sauce
- 1 cup ketchup
- ½ cup apple cider vinegar
- ¼ cup molasses
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon liquid smoke (if not using a smoker)
- For Smoking
- Oak or hickory wood chunks
- Apple juice in a spray bottle

## Instructions

- 1 The Brisket
- 2 **Prep (night before):** Slather brisket lightly with yellow mustard. Apply dry rub generously on all sides. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate overnight.
- 3 **Set up smoker** at 225°F (107°C) using oak or hickory. Place a water pan inside for moisture.
- 4 **Smoke:** Place brisket fat-side up on the smoker. Spritz with apple juice every 90 minutes after the first 3 hours.
- 5 **The stall:** Around 150–165°F internal temp, the brisket will stall (temp stops rising). This is normal. Wait it out, or wrap in butcher paper to push through \*(the "Texas crutch")\*.
- 6 **Target temp:** Cook until internal temperature reaches 200–205°F in the thickest part of the flat. The probe should slide in like butter.
- 7 **Rest:** Wrap in butcher paper, then towels, and place in a cooler (no ice) for at least 1 hour, up to 4 hours. This is essential.
- 8 The Burnt Ends
- 9 **Separate the point** from the flat after resting. The point is the thicker, fattier section.
- 10 **Cube** the point into 1½-inch pieces.
- 11 **Sauce and smoke:** Toss cubes with KC sauce. Place in an aluminum pan, return to smoker at 275°F for 1½–2 hours until edges are caramelized and sticky.
- 12 **Serve** burnt ends as an appetizer, on sandwiches, or piled on white bread with pickles.
- 13 The Sauce
- 14 Combine all sauce ingredients in a saucepan. Simmer over medium-low heat for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until thickened.

## At A Glance

Servings	12–15
Prep Time	30 minutes + overnight rub
Cook Time	12–14 hours (brisket) + 2 hours (burnt ends)
Difficulty	Advanced
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- No smoker? Use the low-and-slow oven method: 225°F with a pan of water on the lower rack. Add liquid smoke to the rub.
- The flat vs. the point: The flat is the lean, sliceable part. The point is fattier and becomes the burnt ends.
- Butcher paper > foil: Foil makes the bark soggy. Unwaxed butcher paper lets it breathe.
- Slice against the grain. The grain direction changes between the flat and point — find it before you cut.
- KC sauce is THICK and SWEET. That's what distinguishes it from Texas (peppery), Carolina (vinegar), and Memphis (dry rub) styles.

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### **Did You Know?**

Kansas City's BBQ legacy traces back to Henry Perry, an African American pit master who began selling smoked meats wrapped in newspaper from an outdoor stand in the early 1900s. His protégé, Charlie Bryant, and later Charlie's brother Arthur Bryant, built the famous Arthur Bryant's restaurant, which Calvin Trillin called "the single best restaurant in the world" in 1972. Burnt ends were originally considered scraps — pit masters at Arthur Bryant's would put them on the counter for customers to snack on for free while waiting. By the 2000s, burnt ends had become the most prized item on the menu. Today, KC has over 100 BBQ restaurants and hosts the American Royal World Series of Barbecue, the largest BBQ competition on Earth.

\* Photography note: Modern editorial style — sliced brisket fanned on butcher paper, burnt ends in a small cast iron skillet alongside, pickles and white bread. Smoke wisps if possible. Dark, moody lighting.\*



## Loose Meat Sandwich (Maid-Rite / Tavern Burger)

*Iowa / Nebraska*

*Not quite a burger. Not quite a sloppy joe. The Loose Meat Sandwich exists in its own Midwestern category — a pile of seasoned, finely crumbled beef heaped onto a bun with no sauce, no apology, and absolutely no patience for your expectations. Iowa claims it. Nebraska loves it. And everyone who tries it wonders why the rest of the country bothers with hamburger patties.*

## Ingredients

- 1.5 lbs (680g) lean ground beef (85/15 — not too lean or it'll be dry)
- 1 medium yellow onion, minced fine as confetti
- 1 cup (240ml) beef broth
- 2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tsp yellow mustard (the cheap stuff, not Dijon)
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp onion powder
- ½ tsp black pepper
- Tiny pinch of nutmeg (trust us)
- Salt to taste
- 4-6 soft white hamburger buns
- For serving: dill pickle slices, yellow mustard, ketchup, chopped raw onion

## Instructions

- 1 **Brown the Beef:** Heat a large skillet over medium-high. Add the beef and onion. Break up the meat aggressively with a wooden spoon or potato masher — you want fine crumbles, not chunks. Cook until no pink remains, about 7-8 minutes.
- 2 **Drain:** Pour off the excess fat. This isn't grease you simmer in; this is grease you abandon.
- 3 **Add Liquids & Simmer:** Return skillet to heat. Add beef broth, Worcestershire, mustard, garlic powder, onion powder, pepper, and that suspicious pinch of nutmeg. Stir well. Bring to a gentle simmer.
- 4 **Cook Low & Slow:** Reduce heat to low. Let it bubble quietly for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until most of the liquid has cooked off but the meat is still moist and tender. It should look loose, not dry. Taste and add salt as needed.
- 5 **Serve:** Toast the buns if you're fancy (most taverns don't bother). Pile the loose meat generously onto each bun. Serve with pickles, mustard, ketchup, and raw onion on the side. Let people build their own.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4-6 sandwiches
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- The Liquid Matters: Beef broth is best. Water works in a pinch. Never use canned beef consommé unless you want it to taste like a salt lick.
- Texture is Everything: The meat should be fine, almost paste-like when cooked, but still moist. If it's dry, you drained too much fat or cooked it too long.
- Tavern-Style Toppings: Midwestern taverns serve these with pickles and onions on the side, never on the sandwich. Mustard and ketchup are applied by the customer, not the cook. This is democracy in sandwich form.
- Make it a Meal: Serve with crinkle-cut fries, potato chips, or (if you're in Minnesota) tater tots.

## Did You Know?

> The Loose Meat Sandwich was born in 1926 at Maid-Rite in Muscatine, Iowa, when a butcher named Fred Angell allegedly stumbled onto the recipe. The original story involves a secret ingredient (still unknown), a garage, and an instant hit with local workers who wanted a hot lunch without utensils. By the 1930s, Maid-Rite had spread across the Midwest like a cafeteria rumor.

>

> Unlike a Sloppy Joe (which is basically ketchup with meat ambitions), a Maid-Rite contains no tomato sauce in the meat mixture. The seasoning is subtle. The beef is the star. It's served "loose" — literally spooned onto the bun — and you're expected to eat it fast before it falls apart. The sandwich appeared on \*Roseanne\* in the 1990s when the Conner family opened the "Lanford Lunch Box," introducing a generation of TV viewers to Iowa's strangest export.

>

> In Nebraska, it's often called a "Tavern Burger" or just "Tavern," served in small-town bars alongside cheap beer and free popcorn. Same sandwich, different name, same glorious mess.

\* Photography note: Diner realism. An open-faced loose meat sandwich on a plain white ceramic plate, meat piled high and visibly crumbly, with the bottom bun soaking up juices. Dill pickle chips and a small glass ramekin of yellow mustard on the side. Background: red-checkered tablecloth or Formica counter, slightly worn. Lighting warm and overhead, like a small-town cafe at lunch hour. No garnish. No frills.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5

(Will serve at any casual gathering, football tailgate, or church basement lunch, and will definitely offer seconds without judgment.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A summer road trip through the Iowa cornfields, a Nebraska dive bar jukebox playing Johnny Cash, Friday night high school football, and the sound of cicadas buzzing outside the open windows of a small-town diner.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Loose Meat Sandwich**

> "Grandma Jean swore by a tiny pinch of nutmeg in the beef mixture — not enough to taste it, just enough to 'round out the flavor,' she'd say, tapping the side of her nose like it was classified information. She also insisted on using the cheap yellow mustard in the cooking, never the fancy stuff. 'Maid-Rite didn't have Dijon in 1926, and neither do we.'"



## Michigan Cherry-Glazed Ham

*Michigan, US*

*A show-stopping centerpiece for any Midwestern gathering, this tender ham is bathed in a luscious, sweet-tart cherry glaze, celebrating Michigan's famed cherry orchards.*

## Ingredients

- 1 (7-9 lb / 3.1-4 kg) pre-cooked spiral-sliced ham
- 1 (12 oz / 340g) jar cherry preserves or jam
- ½ cup (120ml) honey
- ¼ cup (60ml) fresh orange juice (or cherry juice)
- 1 tbsp (15ml) apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- ½ tsp ground ginger
- ¼ tsp ground cloves
- Pinch of salt and black pepper

## Instructions

- 1 Preheat Oven & Prepare Ham:** Preheat your oven to 325°F (160°C). Place the ham in a large roasting pan, fat-side up. If your ham didn't come with glaze instructions, you can add about ½ inch of water to the bottom of the pan to help keep it moist.
- 2 Make Cherry Glaze:** In a medium saucepan, combine the cherry preserves, honey, orange juice, apple cider vinegar, Dijon mustard, ground ginger, ground cloves, salt, and black pepper. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the preserves have melted and the glaze is smooth (about 5-7 minutes).
- 3 First Glaze Application:** Bake the ham for 1 to 1.5 hours, or according to package directions, until it is warmed through (internal temperature of 140°F / 60°C). During the last 30 minutes of baking, begin applying the glaze.
- 4 Continue Glazing:** Increase oven temperature to 375°F (190°C). Brush about one-third of the cherry glaze generously over the ham. Return to the oven and bake for 10-15 minutes.
- 5 Final Glazing:** Repeat the glazing process two more times, brushing the ham with additional glaze every 10-15 minutes, until all the glaze is used and the ham is beautifully caramelized and glossy.
- 6 Rest & Serve:** Remove the ham from the oven and tent loosely with foil. Let it rest for 10-15 minutes before carving and serving. This allows the juices to redistribute and ensures a moist ham.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	10-12
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	1.5 - 2 hours (for a pre-cooked ham)
Total Time	1.75 - 2.25 hours
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- For a spicier kick, add a pinch of red pepper flakes to the glaze mixture.
- Use dark cherry preserves for a richer, more intense cherry flavor.
- Garnish the finished ham with fresh rosemary sprigs or orange slices for a beautiful presentation.
- Save the ham bone to make a delicious split pea soup or bean soup later.

## Did You Know?

> Michigan is renowned as the "Cherry Capital of the World," particularly for its tart cherries grown around Traverse City. This abundance of cherries has inspired countless regional dishes, including this festive cherry-glazed ham. It's a perfect example of how Midwestern cuisine celebrates local agricultural bounty, transforming seasonal ingredients into comforting and memorable meals that are often the centerpiece of holiday tables and special occasions.

\* Photography note: Modern editorial style. A whole, glistening Michigan Cherry-Glazed Ham, beautifully caramelized with a deep reddish-brown sheen, on a large serving platter. It should be partially carved, revealing moist, tender slices. A small bowl of extra glaze and some fresh cherries or rosemary sprigs nearby. Clean, bright lighting with a shallow depth of field to emphasize the ham. The setting should feel elegant yet inviting.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring this as the main dish to any holiday potluck, and discreetly offer to carve it for everyone.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A festive holiday gathering, a special Sunday dinner, and the warm feeling of family and friends celebrating together.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Michigan Cherry-Glazed Ham**

> "Grandma Carol always added a tiny splash of bourbon (about a tablespoon!) to her cherry glaze. 'It deepens the flavor and gives it a little extra kick,' she'd whisper, 'but don't tell anyone, it's our little secret for the best ham in the county!'"



## Nebraska Runza (Beef & Cabbage Sandwich)

*Nebraska*

*A pillowy yeast-dough pocket stuffed with seasoned ground beef, cabbage, and onions. Part sandwich, part hand pie, entirely Nebraskan. It's what happens when German-Russian immigrants meet the Great Plains and decide to make the perfect portable meal.*

## Ingredients

- Dough
- 1 cup warm milk (110°F)
- ¼ cup warm water
- 2¼ teaspoons instant yeast (1 packet)
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 egg, beaten
- 3½–4 cups all-purpose flour
- Filling
- 1½ lbs ground beef
- 1 medium onion, finely diced
- 4 cups green cabbage, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Topping
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the dough:** Combine warm milk, water, yeast, and sugar. Let sit 5 minutes until foamy. Add oil, salt, and egg. Gradually mix in flour until a soft dough forms. Knead 5–7 minutes until smooth and elastic. Place in an oiled bowl, cover, rise 1 hour until doubled.
- 2 **Make the filling:** Brown ground beef in a large skillet over medium-high, breaking into small crumbles. Add onion, cook 3 minutes. Add cabbage, garlic, salt, pepper, and garlic powder. Cook 8–10 minutes, stirring often, until cabbage is soft and liquid has evaporated. Let cool to room temperature.
- 3 **Assemble:** Punch down dough and divide into 12 equal pieces. Roll each into a 6-inch circle. Place ~½ cup filling in the center. Fold dough over filling and pinch edges firmly to seal. Place seam-side down on a parchment-lined baking sheet, 2 inches apart.
- 4 **Rest** 15 minutes while oven preheats to 375°F (190°C).
- 5 **Bake** 18–20 minutes until golden brown.
- 6 **Brush** tops with melted butter immediately out of the oven.

## At A Glance

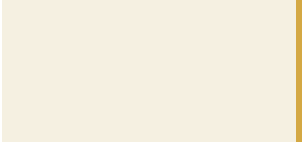
Servings	12 runzas
Prep Time	45 minutes + 1 hour rise
Cook Time	20 minutes
Difficulty	Intermediate
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Sealing is critical: If the edges aren't pinched tight, filling leaks. Wet your fingertip with water to help the dough stick.
- Cheese runza: Add a strip of American or pepper jack cheese with the filling before sealing.
- Pizza runza: Use pizza sauce, mozzarella, and pepperoni as filling.
- Freezer-friendly: Bake, cool completely, wrap individually, freeze up to 3 months. Reheat in a 350°F oven for 15 minutes.
- The Runza restaurant test: If you've had one at a Runza drive-through in Nebraska, you know the benchmark. This recipe gets you there.

## Did You Know?

The Runza has roots in the \*Bierock\* (also spelled \*Bieroc\*), a stuffed bread brought to the Great Plains by Volga German immigrants — ethnic Germans who had settled in Russia before emigrating to the American Midwest in the late 1800s. The Runza Restaurant chain, founded in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1949, turned this immigrant staple into a regional fast-food icon. Today there are over 90 Runza locations across Nebraska, and the chain is so beloved that Runza sandwiches are served at University of Nebraska football games at Memorial Stadium. On game days, they sell over 10,000 Runzas.



\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — two runzas on a cutting board, one cut in half showing the filling, with a bowl of yellow mustard. Rustic kitchen backdrop, red-checked napkin.\*



## Pan-Fried Walleye with Tartar Sauce

*Minnesota, Wisconsin, the Dakotas — Lake Country*

*A fresh walleye fillet, dredged in seasoned flour and cornmeal, pan-fried in butter until the crust is golden and crackling and the fish inside flakes into sweet, delicate white layers. This is what Minnesotans dream about during ice fishing season, what lake cabin weekends are built around, and what makes the Upper Midwest's freshwater fishing tradition worth the mosquito bites.*

## Ingredients

- The Walleye
- 1½ pounds walleye fillets (4 fillets), skin removed, pin bones checked
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup fine yellow cornmeal
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Lemon wedges, for serving
- Shore Lunch Tartar Sauce
- ¾ cup mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons dill pickle relish (or finely chopped dill pickles)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon capers, chopped (optional but recommended)
- 1 teaspoon dried dill
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- Hot sauce to taste (a few dashes)
- Salt and pepper to taste

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the tartar sauce.** Stir all tartar sauce ingredients together in a small bowl. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to let flavors marry. This step can be done hours or even a day ahead.
- 2 **Prep the fish.** Pat the walleye fillets completely dry with paper towels — this is crucial for a crispy crust. Season both sides lightly with salt and pepper.
- 3 **Set up your dredge.** In a shallow dish, combine the flour, cornmeal, garlic powder, paprika, onion powder, and cayenne. In another shallow dish, beat the eggs with a tablespoon of water.
- 4 **Coat the fillets.** Dip each fillet first in the egg wash, letting excess drip off, then press into the seasoned flour-cornmeal mixture, coating both sides evenly. Set the coated fillets on a plate.
- 5 **Pan-fry.** Heat the butter and oil together in a large skillet over medium-high heat. When the butter is foaming and fragrant (but not brown), carefully lay the fillets in the pan. Don't crowd — work in batches if needed. Cook for 3–4 minutes per side, until the crust is deeply golden and the fish flakes easily when tested with a fork. The butter will brown slightly during cooking — this is a good thing. Browned butter = flavor.
- 6 **Drain and serve.** Transfer the fillets to a paper towel-lined plate briefly, then serve immediately with tartar sauce, lemon wedges, and whatever sides speak to you — coleslaw, potato salad, or corn on the cob.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes
Total Time	25 minutes
Difficulty	Easy to Moderate
Category	Mains / Seafood

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Nothing says "welcome to the cabin" like the sound of walleye hitting a hot pan of butter. Minnesotans will make this for anyone — it's the ultimate act of lake hospitality.

## Tips & Variations

- **The Fish:** Walleye is the gold standard for pan-frying in the Upper Midwest — its flesh is mild, sweet, firm enough to hold together, and delicate enough to let the butter and crust shine. If walleye isn't available, perch, crappie, or bluegill are excellent substitutes. Cod works but isn't the same (and Minnesotans will know).

- **Shore Lunch Style:** The classic "shore lunch" preparation — cooking freshly caught walleye on the lakeshore over a campfire — uses a simpler dredge: just seasoned flour, no egg wash. The fish goes straight from the lake to the pan. If you're doing this, add extra butter and don't worry about technique. The setting does half the work.

- Butter is Non-Negotiable: The combination of butter and a neutral oil gives you butter flavor with a higher smoke point. Some recipes use all butter, and if you watch it carefully, this is even better. Vegetable oil alone is acceptable but joyless.
- Don't Overcook: Walleye is a thin, delicate fillet. 3–4 minutes per side is plenty. When the fish flakes easily and the crust is golden, it's done. Overcooked walleye is dry walleye, and dry walleye is a wasted fish.
- The Minnesota-Wisconsin Rivalry: Minnesota claims walleye as its state fish. Wisconsin claims perch as its fish fry king. Both states are right and both states are wrong. (But Minnesota's walleye is better. There. We said it.)
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"Add a splash of Worcestershire sauce to the egg wash. It adds a savory depth that you can't quite identify but you definitely miss when it's not there. And always use a cast iron skillet. Always."\*

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### Pairs Well With

A sunset over a Minnesota lake, a cold beer in a koozie, the sound of loons calling, and the quiet pride of having caught the fish yourself (or the quiet lie of having caught the fish yourself — we don't judge).

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### Did You Know?

> Walleye is the official state fish of Minnesota, and for good reason — the state has more walleye than virtually anywhere else in North America. The name comes from the fish's distinctive large, glassy, almost opaque eyes, which reflect light and help it see in murky or dark water (making it a superb predator and a challenging catch). Walleye fishing is not just a hobby in Minnesota — it's a cultural pillar. The Governor's Fishing Opener is an annual state event covered by local news. Ice fishing for walleye draws hundreds of thousands of anglers onto frozen lakes every winter. And the "shore lunch" — pan-frying walleye in butter on the shore of the lake where you just caught it — is considered by many Minnesotans to be the single best meal you can eat, period. There are no reservations, no dress codes, and no second helpings unless you catch more fish. The Lake of the Woods region in northern Minnesota is known as the "Walleye Capital of the World," and local restaurants serve it every way imaginable: fried, grilled, baked, in tacos, in chowder. But pan-fried in butter, on the shore, with people you love? That's the one that matters.

\* Photography note: Two golden-crust walleye fillets on a simple plate, lemon wedges alongside, a small bowl of tartar sauce. Maybe a lakeside picnic table setting — pine trees in the background, a tackle box barely visible. Late afternoon light, golden and warm. The photo should smell like butter and pine needles and summer.\*



# Pierogi

*Michigan / Ohio (Polish Heritage)*

*These tender, savory dumplings, often filled with potatoes and cheese, are a beloved comfort food, especially in the heavily Polish-influenced communities of the Midwest.*

## Ingredients

- For the Dough:
  - 2 cups (240g) all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
  - 1 large egg
  - ½ cup (120ml) sour cream
  - ¼ cup (60ml) water
  - ½ tsp salt
- For the Potato & Cheese Filling:
  - 2 large russet potatoes (about 1.5 lbs / 680g), peeled and quartered
  - 4 oz (113g) cream cheese, softened
  - 4 oz (113g) sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
  - 2 tbsp (30g) unsalted butter, melted
  - ¼ cup (60ml) milk or half-and-half
  - Salt and black pepper to taste
- For Serving:
  - 4 tbsp (60g) unsalted butter
  - 1 large onion, thinly sliced
  - Sour cream, for dolloping
  - Fresh chives or parsley, chopped, for garnish

## Instructions

- 1 Prepare Filling:** Boil potatoes in salted water until very tender, about 15-20 minutes. Drain well. Return to the hot pot and mash thoroughly. Stir in cream cheese, shredded cheddar, melted butter, and milk. Mix until smooth and creamy. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Set aside to cool completely.
- 2 Make Dough:** In a large bowl, combine flour and salt. In a separate bowl, whisk egg, sour cream, and water. Add wet ingredients to dry ingredients and mix until a shaggy dough forms. Turn out onto a lightly floured surface and knead for 5-7 minutes until smooth and elastic. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest for 30 minutes.
- 3 Roll & Cut Dough:** Divide dough in half. On a lightly floured surface, roll one half of the dough thinly (about ¼ inch / 3mm thick). Use a 3-inch (7.5 cm) round cutter or rim of a glass to cut out circles. Re-roll scraps as needed.
- 4 Fill Pierogi:** Place a teaspoon of cooled filling in the center of each dough circle. Fold the dough over the filling to create a half-moon shape. Pinch the edges firmly to seal, crimping with a fork if desired to ensure a tight seal.
- 5 Boil Pierogi:** Bring a large pot of salted water to a rolling boil. Add pierogi in batches (about 6-8 at a time) and cook for 3-5 minutes, or until they float to the surface and the dough is tender. Remove with a slotted spoon and place on a lightly greased baking sheet or plate.
- 6 Sauté Onions:** While pierogi are boiling, melt 4 tbsp butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add sliced onion and cook until deeply caramelized and tender, about 15-20 minutes.
- 7 Sauté Pierogi (Optional):** For a golden-brown finish, add boiled pierogi to the skillet with caramelized onions and sauté for 2-3 minutes per side until lightly browned and crispy.
- 8 Serve:** Serve hot, topped with caramelized onions, a dollop of sour cream, and fresh chives or parsley.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8 (about 30-40 pierogi)
Prep Time	60 minutes
Cook Time	20-30 minutes (in batches)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Experiment with fillings: add sautéed mushrooms, ground meat, or sweet fruit fillings (like prune or cherry).
- For a richer dough, use melted butter instead of water.
- To freeze: Place uncooked pierogi on a floured baking sheet in a single layer. Freeze until solid, then transfer to a freezer-safe bag. Cook from frozen in boiling water for an extra 2-3 minutes.
- Serve with a side of crispy bacon bits for added texture and flavor.

## Did You Know?

> Pierogi are a beloved culinary tradition in many Midwestern communities, particularly those with a strong Polish, Ukrainian, or Eastern European heritage. Cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago have long celebrated pierogi as a staple, deeply woven into holiday meals, church festivals, and family gatherings. These savory dumplings represent the enduring cultural ties and comfort food traditions brought by immigrants to the heart of America.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A generous plate of golden-brown pierogi, glistening with melted butter and topped with deeply caramelized onions. A dollop of fresh sour cream and a sprinkle of chives provide color. Served on a simple ceramic plate on a wooden table. Soft, natural lighting highlights the tender dough and rich filling.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5

(Will absolutely bring a tray to the church bake sale, and might even offer to help set up the tables.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A snowy Sunday afternoon, a lively family gathering, and sharing stories about your ancestors while sipping strong coffee.

Grandma's Secret: Pierogi

> "Grandma Kaczmarek insisted on using a splash of vodka in the pierogi dough. 'It makes them extra tender, like little pillows!' she'd whisper, 'and it evaporates completely, so don't you worry.'"



## Pork Chops and Applesauce

*Michigan / Wisconsin (Orchard Belt)*

*Pork and apples. Apples and pork. The pairing is so obvious that it barely qualifies as cooking — unless you grew up in Michigan or Wisconsin, where it's not just dinner, it's a statement about seasonal eating, agricultural pride, and what you do with a bumper crop of Honeycrisps in October. This is what happens when the orchard belt meets the hog farm, and it's been on Midwest tables since your great-grandmother was frying chops in a cast-iron skillet.*

## Ingredients

- For the Pork Chops:
- 4 bone-in pork chops, about 1 inch thick (1.5 lbs total)
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil or bacon fat
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp black pepper
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp dried sage or thyme
- For the Applesauce:
- 4 medium apples (Honeycrisp, Jonathan, or Cortland), peeled, cored, and chopped
- ¼ cup (60ml) water or apple cider
- 2 tbsp butter
- 2 tbsp brown sugar (adjust to taste)
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tsp bourbon or apple brandy (optional, but encouraged)

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the Applesauce:** In a medium saucepan, combine the chopped apples, water (or cider), butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, and a pinch of salt. Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for 12-15 minutes until the apples are soft and breaking down. Mash with a potato masher for chunky applesauce, or blend smooth if you prefer. Stir in the bourbon or brandy if using. Taste and adjust sweetness. Keep warm.
- 2 **Season the Chops:** Pat the pork chops dry with paper towels. Season both sides generously with salt, pepper, garlic powder, and sage (or thyme).
- 3 **Sear the Chops:** Heat the oil or bacon fat in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. When the pan is hot, add the pork chops. Sear without moving them for 4-5 minutes on the first side until a deep golden crust forms. Flip and cook another 4-5 minutes on the second side, until the internal temperature reaches 145°F (63°C). The chops should have a nice crust and be juicy inside.
- 4 **Rest & Serve:** Remove the chops from the pan and let rest for 5 minutes. Serve each pork chop with a generous spoonful of warm applesauce on the side (or over the top, if you're feeling bold).

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	40 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Apple Varieties: Use a mix of sweet and tart apples for complexity. Honeycrisp, Jonathan, and Northern Spy are all Michigan classics.
- Stovetop to Oven: After searing, you can finish the chops in a 375°F oven for 8-10 minutes for extra-thick chops.
- Quick Applesauce: In a pinch, use store-bought unsweetened applesauce and doctor it up with butter, cinnamon, and a splash of bourbon.
- Leftover Applesauce: Keeps in the fridge for a week. Serve it with pancakes, oatmeal, or straight from the jar.

## Did You Know?

- > Michigan is the third-largest apple producer in the United States, with orchards stretching along the Lake Michigan shoreline and inland toward the Thumb. Wisconsin isn't far behind. Both states have strong hog farming traditions, making pork and apples a natural culinary partnership. The pairing goes back to Colonial times, when European settlers brought both apple trees and pigs to the New World.
- >

> In the Midwest, pork chops and applesauce became a weeknight staple in the mid-20th century, when both pork and apples were abundant and affordable. The dish shows up in community cookbooks from the 1950s onward, often with instructions to use "whatever apples you have" — a testament to Midwestern practicality.

>

> The phrase "pork chops and applesauce" became a pop culture punchline thanks to \*The Brady Bunch\*, when Peter Brady impersonated Humphrey Bogart while serving dinner. It's corny. It's dated. But it's also deeply, unapologetically Midwestern — a humble dish elevated by seasonal ingredients and a little bit of care.

\* Photography note: Autumn farmhouse. A thick, golden-brown pork chop on a white ceramic plate with a generous scoop of chunky applesauce on the side. Fresh apple slices and a sprig of sage as garnish. Shot on a weathered wooden table with a faded plaid napkin. Soft, late-afternoon light from a window. Background: a bowl of fresh apples, slightly out of focus. The vibe should be October on a Michigan farm.\*

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### Midwest Nice Rating

4/5

(Will serve this to anyone who stops by during apple season, and will send them home with a jar of applesauce.)

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### Pairs Well With

A chilly October evening, a trip to the orchard, a pot of mashed potatoes, and the smell of wood smoke from a neighbor's fire pit.

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### Grandma's Secret: Pork Chops And Applesauce

> "Grandma Eleanor always added a teaspoon of good bourbon to the applesauce while it simmered. 'It deepens the apple flavor,' she'd say with a wink, 'and makes it taste like a grown-up made it.' She also insisted on bone-in chops, claiming the bone added flavor and kept the meat from drying out. She was right."



## Shepherd's Pie (Midwest Cottage Pie)

*Michigan / Minnesota (Mining Country Adaptation)*

*This isn't authentic British Shepherd's Pie — it's what happened when Irish and Cornish miners brought the recipe to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Minnesota's Iron Range in the 1800s, then adapted it with whatever meat was cheap and whatever vegetables were in the root cellar. Real Shepherd's Pie uses lamb. Midwest "Shepherd's Pie" uses ground beef, and no one apologizes for it. It's a casserole of leftovers and economical thinking, topped with a thick blanket of mashed potatoes and baked until the edges are crispy and the middle is bubbling. It's mining-town comfort food, and it fed generations of families who worked underground.*

## Ingredients

- For the Filling:
  - 1 tbsp vegetable oil or bacon fat
  - 1.5 lbs (680g) ground beef (80/20 — don't use lean)
  - 1 large yellow onion, diced
  - 2 medium carrots, peeled and diced
  - 2 cloves garlic, minced
  - 1 tbsp all-purpose flour
  - 1 cup (240ml) beef broth
  - 2 tbsp tomato paste
  - 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
  - 1 tsp dried thyme
  - ½ tsp dried rosemary, crushed
  - 1 cup (150g) frozen peas
  - 1 cup (150g) frozen corn (optional, but very Midwest)
  - Salt and black pepper to taste
- For the Mashed Potato Topping:
  - 2 lbs (900g) russet or Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and quartered
  - ½ cup (120ml) whole milk, warmed
  - 4 tbsp (56g) butter, softened
  - Salt and black pepper to taste
- Optional: ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese (very Midwest)

## Instructions

- 1 Boil the Potatoes:** Place potatoes in a large pot, cover with cold salted water, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15-18 minutes until fork-tender. Drain well.
- 2 Mash the Potatoes:** Return drained potatoes to the hot pot. Add warm milk, butter, salt, and pepper. Mash until smooth and creamy. Taste and adjust seasoning. Set aside.
- 3 Brown the Beef:** Heat oil or bacon fat in a large oven-safe skillet (cast iron is ideal) over medium-high heat. Add the ground beef and onion. Cook, breaking up the meat with a wooden spoon, until browned and no pink remains, about 7-8 minutes. Drain excess fat if needed, leaving about 1 tablespoon in the pan.
- 4 Add Vegetables:** Stir in the diced carrots and cook for 5 minutes until they start to soften. Add garlic, thyme, and rosemary; cook 1 minute until fragrant.
- 5 Thicken the Filling:** Sprinkle the flour over the meat mixture and stir well. Cook for 2 minutes. Add the tomato paste and stir to coat everything.
- 6 Build the Sauce:** Pour in the beef broth and Worcestershire sauce. Stir constantly until the mixture thickens and bubbles, about 3-4 minutes. Stir in the peas and corn. Taste and season generously with salt and pepper. The filling should be thick and saucy, not soupy.
- 7 Assemble:** Spread the meat filling evenly in the skillet (or transfer to a 9x13-inch baking dish). Spoon the mashed potatoes over the top, spreading to the edges to seal in the filling. Use a fork to create ridges and texture on the surface — this helps it brown. If using cheese, sprinkle it over the potatoes now.
- 8 Bake:** Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C). Bake for 25-30 minutes until the filling is bubbling at the edges and the potato topping is golden brown. For extra browning, broil for the last 2-3 minutes, watching carefully.
- 9 Rest & Serve:** Let the pie rest for 10 minutes before serving. This keeps it from falling apart when you scoop. Serve in deep bowls or on plates.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8 (or 4 miners)
Prep Time	25 minutes
Cook Time	35 minutes
Total Time	60 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- **The Lamb Debate:** If you want to be traditional, use ground lamb instead of beef. Most Midwesterners don't bother.
- **Leftover Mashed Potatoes:** This is an excellent use for leftover mashed potatoes. Just warm them slightly before spreading.
- **Vegetable Add-Ins:** Root cellar vegetables like turnips, parsnips, or rutabaga were traditional in mining communities. Use what you have.

- Cheese or No Cheese: Adding cheddar to the potatoes or on top is a very American adaptation. It's not traditional, but it's delicious.
  - Leftovers: Reheats beautifully. In fact, it's better the next day.
- 

### **Did You Know?**

- > Shepherd's Pie (properly made with lamb) and Cottage Pie (made with beef) are British dishes that arrived in the Midwest with Irish, Scottish, and Cornish immigrants who came to work in the iron mines and copper mines of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Minnesota's Iron Range in the mid-1800s. The dish was economical, filling, and could be made with whatever meat and vegetables were available.
  - >
  - > In the Midwest, the terms "Shepherd's Pie" and "Cottage Pie" became interchangeable, and beef became the standard because it was cheaper and more available than lamb. Mining families would make it on Sunday and reheat it throughout the week. It was the ultimate make-ahead meal for households where everyone worked long shifts.
  - >
  - > The dish also became popular in farming communities across the Midwest as a way to use up leftover roast beef or ground meat. It's practical, forgiving, and deeply satisfying — which is why it stuck around long after the mines closed.
  - \* Photography note: Working-class realism. A cast-iron skillet of shepherd's pie fresh from the oven, the mashed potato topping golden and craggy, with filling bubbling at the edges. A serving spoon has already taken a scoop, showing the layered interior. Shot on a simple kitchen table with a faded potholder nearby. Lighting should be warm and slightly dim, like a kitchen in the evening. No garnish. No frills.\*
- 

### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5

(Will bring this to anyone who's going through a hard time, and will leave the dish so they don't have to worry about returning it.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

A cold November evening, a long day of physical work, a scratched Formica table, and the knowledge that there will be leftovers for lunch tomorrow.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Shepherd's Pie**

> "Grandma Betty, whose father worked the Soudan Mine in Minnesota, always stirred a big spoonful of tomato paste into the meat filling before adding the broth. 'Gives it color and richness,' she'd say, 'and makes it taste like you simmered it for hours.' She also insisted on making deep fork marks in the mashed potatoes so they'd crisp up in the oven. 'If it's not crunchy on top, you didn't do it right.'"



## Sloppy Joes

*Iowa (Sioux City Origin Claim)*

*The Sloppy Joe is a sandwich that embraces chaos. Sweet, tangy, saucy ground beef piled onto a soft bun, guaranteed to drip down your wrists and onto your plate. It's cafeteria food, church basement food, quick-weeknight-dinner food. And while several states claim to have invented it, **Iowa** insists it was born in Sioux City in the 1930s at a diner run by a cook named Joe. We'll never know for sure, but that's never stopped anyone in the Midwest from making them anyway.*

## Ingredients

- 1.5 lbs (680g) ground beef (80/20 — you need the fat for flavor)
- 1 medium yellow onion, finely diced
- 1 green bell pepper, finely diced (optional, but adds texture)
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 (15 oz / 425g) can tomato sauce
- ½ cup (120ml) ketchup
- 3 tbsp brown sugar, packed
- 2 tbsp yellow mustard
- 2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tbsp apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp smoked paprika (optional, for depth)
- ½ tsp black pepper
- Salt to taste
- 6 soft white hamburger buns
- Optional toppings: dill pickle slices, shredded cheddar cheese

## Instructions

- 1 **Brown the Beef:** Heat a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the ground beef and cook, breaking it up with a wooden spoon, until browned and no pink remains, about 7-8 minutes. Drain off most of the fat, leaving about 1 tablespoon in the pan.
- 2 **Cook the Vegetables:** Add the diced onion, bell pepper (if using), and garlic to the skillet. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are softened, about 5 minutes.
- 3 **Build the Sauce:** Stir in the tomato sauce, ketchup, brown sugar, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, smoked paprika, and black pepper. Mix well until everything is combined.
- 4 **Simmer:** Reduce heat to low and let the mixture simmer, uncovered, for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally. The sauce should thicken and the flavors should meld. Taste and add salt as needed.
- 5 **Serve:** Toast the buns lightly if you're feeling fancy (most people don't). Pile the Sloppy Joe mixture generously onto the bottom buns. Top with pickles or cheese if desired. Cap with the top bun. Serve immediately with a stack of napkins.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4-6 sandwiches
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- Sweetness Level: Adjust the brown sugar to taste. Some folks like it sweeter, others prefer more tang. Start with 2 tbsp and add more if needed.
- Spice it Up: Add a pinch of cayenne pepper or a dash of hot sauce for heat.
- Pickle Juice Secret: Stir in 1-2 tablespoons of pickle juice at the end for brightness and acidity. This is Grandma Betty's move.
- Manwich vs. Homemade: Store-bought Manwich sauce is convenient, but homemade tastes better and lets you control the sweetness and spice.
- Leftovers: Sloppy Joe filling freezes well and reheats beautifully. Make a double batch.

## Did You Know?

> The origin story of the Sloppy Joe is murky, but one popular version claims it was invented in Sioux City, Iowa, in the 1930s by a cook named Joe at a small diner. The sandwich was originally called "loose meat" (sound familiar?), but Joe's version had a tomato-based sauce, setting it apart from the Maid-Rite style. Another story credits a bar in Havana, Cuba, also named "Sloppy Joe's."

>

> Regardless of where it started, the Sloppy Joe became a Midwest staple by the 1950s and '60s, appearing in school cafeterias, church fundraisers, and weeknight dinner rotations. The canned sauce version — Manwich — launched in 1969 and turned Sloppy Joes into a convenience food. Hunt's slogan, "A sandwich is a sandwich, but a Manwich is a meal," became iconic.

>

> The Sloppy Joe is unapologetically messy, cheap, and kid-friendly. It's not fancy. It's not Instagram-worthy. But it's fast, filling, and nostalgic — which is exactly what you want on a Wednesday night when no one feels like cooking.

\* Photography note: Cafeteria nostalgia. A Sloppy Joe on a soft white bun, overflowing with saucy beef, served on a plain white plate or a school lunch tray. Sauce dripping onto the plate. A stack of dill pickle chips on the side and a small pile of crinkle-cut fries in the background. Shot with overhead fluorescent-style lighting that's slightly cool and flat — this should evoke a 1980s school cafeteria, not a gourmet kitchen.\*

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### Midwest Nice Rating

4/5

(Will bring this to a potluck in a slow cooker, keep it on "warm," and cheerfully remind everyone to grab extra napkins.)

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### Pairs Well With

A Tuesday night when you don't feel like cooking, a school fundraiser spaghetti dinner, a basement rec room full of kids, and the satisfying knowledge that dinner cost less than \$10.

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### Grandma's Secret: Sloppy Joes

> "Grandma Betty always stirred in a tablespoon of pickle juice at the very end, just before serving. 'Brightens the whole thing up,' she'd say, 'cuts through all that sweet and makes it taste like \*something\*.' She also insisted on toasting the buns in a dry skillet so they wouldn't get soggy. 'Nobody likes a wet bun, honey.'"



## St. Louis Toasted Ravioli

*St. Louis, Missouri — The Hill Neighborhood*

*Not actually toasted but gloriously deep-fried, these crispy, golden pillows of meat-filled pasta are St. Louis's proudest happy accident — born on The Hill, served at every bar and restaurant in town, and utterly impossible to eat just one.*

## Ingredients

- The Ravioli
- 1 package (25 ounces) frozen meat ravioli (do NOT thaw)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 cups Italian-seasoned breadcrumbs
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Vegetable or canola oil for frying (about 3 inches in a heavy pot)
- For Serving
- Warm marinara sauce for dipping
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese for dusting
- Chopped fresh parsley

## Instructions

- 1 **Set up your breading station.** In a shallow bowl, whisk together the eggs and milk. In a separate shallow dish, combine the breadcrumbs, Parmesan, garlic powder, and black pepper.
- 2 **Bread the ravioli.** Working in batches, dip each frozen ravioli into the egg wash, letting the excess drip off, then press firmly into the breadcrumb mixture, coating both sides evenly. Place breaded ravioli on a wire rack or sheet pan. Let them sit for 5 minutes so the coating adheres.
- 3 **Heat the oil.** Pour oil into a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven to a depth of about 3 inches. Heat to 350°F. Use a deep-fry or candy thermometer for accuracy — temperature control is key.
- 4 **Fry in batches.** Carefully lower 5–6 ravioli at a time into the hot oil. Don't overcrowd the pot. Fry for 2–3 minutes, turning once, until they're deeply golden brown and crispy all over.
- 5 **Drain.** Remove with a slotted spoon or spider strainer and drain on a wire rack set over a sheet pan (preferred over paper towels for maximum crispiness). Season immediately with a light dusting of Parmesan and salt while still hot.
- 6 **Serve hot.** Arrange on a platter, dust with more Parmesan and chopped parsley, and serve immediately with warm marinara sauce for dipping.

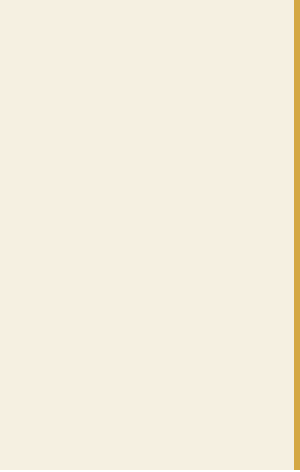
## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6–8 (about 36 ravioli)
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	15 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains / Appetizers

## Tips & Variations

- Frozen is the way. Using frozen (not thawed) ravioli is essential — they hold their shape during frying and the filling heats through without the pasta turning mushy.
- Cheese Filling: Substitute cheese ravioli for a vegetarian version. They fry up beautifully.
- Air Fryer Method: Spray breaded ravioli with cooking spray. Air fry at 400°F for 8–10 minutes, flipping halfway. Not quite the same as deep-fried, but a solid weeknight alternative.
- Baked Version: Place breaded ravioli on a greased sheet pan, mist with cooking spray, and bake at 425°F for 15–18 minutes, flipping once.
- Provel Dip: For true St. Louis authenticity, melt some Provel cheese into your marinara for a creamy, tangy dipping sauce.
- Make It a Meal: Serve a big platter as a main course alongside a simple green salad with Italian dressing.

## Did You Know?



> The legend goes like this: sometime in the 1940s on The Hill — St. Louis's historic Italian-American neighborhood — a cook accidentally dropped a ravioli into the deep fryer instead of the boiling pasta water. Rather than toss it, someone tasted it, and a St. Louis icon was born. The two restaurants most often credited are Mama Campisi's and Charlie Gitto's, both on The Hill, though the true origin remains happily disputed. Today, "t-ravs" (as locals call them) appear on virtually every restaurant menu in St. Louis, from dive bars to white-tablecloth establishments. They're the official appetizer of Busch Stadium, and no Cardinals game is complete without a box of them. St. Louisans who move away consistently rank toasted ravioli as the food they miss most.

\* Photography note: A pile of golden-brown toasted ravioli on a white oval plate, one broken open to reveal the meat filling. A small bowl of bright red marinara sauce with a ravioli mid-dip. Parmesan and parsley scattered. Red-and-white checked cloth underneath. Warm, casual Italian-American trattoria feel.\*



## Swedish Meatballs

*Minnesota*

*A hearty and comforting dish, these tender, perfectly seasoned meatballs bathed in a rich, creamy gravy are a testament to Minnesota's strong Scandinavian roots.*

## Ingredients

- For the Meatballs:
  - 1 lb (450g) ground beef (80/20 recommended)
  - ½ lb (225g) ground pork
  - ½ cup (40g) breadcrumbs (Panko or fresh)
  - ¼ cup (60ml) milk or cream
  - 1 small onion, finely minced and sautéed until softened
  - 1 large egg, lightly beaten
  - 1 tsp salt
  - ½ tsp black pepper
  - ¼ tsp ground allspice
  - ⅛ tsp ground nutmeg
- For the Gravy:
  - 2 tbsp (30g) unsalted butter
  - 2 tbsp (15g) all-purpose flour
  - 2 cups (480ml) beef broth
  - ½ cup (120ml) heavy cream or half-and-half
  - 1 tbsp (15ml) Worcestershire sauce
  - 1 tbsp (15g) Dijon mustard
  - Salt and black pepper to taste
- For Serving:
  - Cooked egg noodles or mashed potatoes
  - Lingonberry preserves (optional)
  - Fresh parsley, chopped (for garnish)

## Instructions

- 1 Prepare Meatballs:** In a large bowl, gently combine ground beef, ground pork, breadcrumbs, milk (or cream), sautéed minced onion, egg, salt, pepper, allspice, and nutmeg. Mix until just combined – do not overmix, or meatballs will be tough.
- 2 Form Meatballs:** Roll the mixture into small, 1-inch (2.5 cm) meatballs. You should get about 30-35 meatballs.
- 3 Cook Meatballs:** Heat a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add a tablespoon of oil if needed. Brown the meatballs in batches until seared on all sides. They don't need to be cooked through. Remove meatballs from skillet and set aside.
- 4 Make Roux:** In the same skillet (don't drain the drippings), melt butter over medium heat. Whisk in flour and cook for 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until a light roux forms.
- 5 Whisk in Liquids:** Slowly whisk in the beef broth, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Bring to a simmer, whisking until the gravy thickens. Reduce heat to low.
- 6 Finish Gravy:** Stir in the heavy cream, Worcestershire sauce, and Dijon mustard. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Return the browned meatballs to the gravy. Cover and simmer for 15-20 minutes, or until meatballs are cooked through and flavors have melded.
- 7 Serve:** Serve hot over cooked egg noodles or creamy mashed potatoes. Garnish with fresh chopped parsley and a dollop of lingonberry preserves on the side, if desired.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	30-35 minutes
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- For a richer flavor, use a mix of beef and veal instead of pork.
- If you prefer a less creamy gravy, you can reduce the amount of heavy cream and use more beef broth.
- Make ahead: Meatballs can be cooked and stored in the gravy in the refrigerator for up to 3 days. Reheat gently on the stovetop.
- Serve with pickled cucumbers for an authentic Scandinavian touch.

## Did You Know?

> Swedish Meatballs are a beloved comfort food in Minnesota, a state with a significant Scandinavian heritage. Many Minnesotans trace their roots to Sweden and Norway, bringing with them culinary traditions that became staples in their new home. Often served at family gatherings, holidays, and community events, these tender meatballs in their creamy gravy are more than just a meal; they are a taste of heritage.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A generous portion of Swedish meatballs nestled in creamy gravy, served over a bed of fluffy mashed potatoes or egg noodles, in a deep ceramic bowl. A small spoonful of bright red lingonberry preserves on the side. Garnish with fresh green parsley. Soft, overhead natural light highlighting the rich texture of the gravy.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5

(Will definitely bring to a family gathering, and probably offer you the last one even if I really want it.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A snowy Minnesota evening, a cozy sweater, and a quiet night in with good company (and maybe a little friendly passive-aggressive competition over whose grandma made them best).

Grandma's Secret: Swedish Meatballs

> "Grandma Svennson always snuck in a tiny pinch of ground cardamom into her meatballs. 'Just a whisper,' she'd say, 'to make them taste like home.' It added a subtle, warm complexity no one could quite pinpoint but everyone loved."



# Tater Tot Hotdish

*Minnesota*

*The crown jewel of Minnesota cuisine. Don't call it a casserole — in Minnesota, it's a \*hotdish\*, and that distinction matters. Layers of ground beef, creamy soup, vegetables, and a golden crown of tater tots. It's comfort food elevated to cultural identity.*

## Ingredients

- 1½ lbs ground beef (80/20)
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 can (10.5 oz) cream of mushroom soup
- 1 can (10.5 oz) cream of chicken soup
- ½ cup whole milk
- 1 bag (16 oz) frozen mixed vegetables (corn, peas, green beans, carrots)
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 bag (32 oz) frozen tater tots
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat** oven to 375°F (190°C). Grease a 9×13-inch baking dish.
- 2 **Brown the beef:** In a large skillet over medium-high, cook ground beef and onion until beef is browned and onion is soft, about 8 minutes. Add garlic, cook 1 minute. Drain excess fat.
- 3 **Make the filling:** Stir in both soups, milk, Worcestershire sauce, salt, and pepper. Fold in frozen vegetables.
- 4 **Layer:** Spread meat mixture evenly in the baking dish. Sprinkle cheese on top. Arrange tater tots in a single layer over the cheese — neat rows for the perfectionists, scattered for the rebels.
- 5 **Bake** uncovered for 45–50 minutes until tots are golden and crispy and filling is bubbling around the edges.
- 6 **Rest** 5 minutes before serving straight from the dish.

## At A Glance

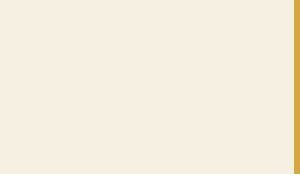
Servings	8–10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	45–50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Mains

## Tips & Variations

- The tot arrangement debate: Some families insist on perfect rows. Others dump and spread. Both camps are correct. This is a judgment-free hotdish zone.
- Cream soup swap: For a from-scratch version, make a quick mushroom béchamel instead of canned soup.
- Protein alternatives: Ground turkey, leftover roast beef, or even wild rice for vegetarian.
- Extra crispy tots: Broil for the last 2–3 minutes. Watch carefully.
- The church basement method: Double the recipe. Use a full-size aluminum pan. Feed 30 people. Accept compliments.

## Did You Know?

"Hotdish" is a distinctly Minnesotan term — and Minnesotans will politely but firmly correct you if you call it a casserole. The word has been in use since at least the 1930s, and the tater tot version became the definitive hotdish after Ore-Ida introduced frozen tater tots in 1956. In 2022, Minnesota declared tater tot hotdish the official state dish. There's even an annual "Hotdish Cook-Off" at the Minnesota State Capitol, where legislators compete with their personal recipes. Former Senator Al Franken was known to be a serious hotdish competitor.



\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — in a well-used ceramic baking dish, scooped portion on a plate beside it, showing the layered cross-section. Kitchen table, oven mitt nearby. Warm overhead lighting.\*



## Wisconsin Friday Fish Fry

*Wisconsin — Every Supper Club, VFW Hall, and Church Basement in the State*

*Beer-battered cod fried to a shattering golden crust, served with a mountain of coleslaw, rye bread with butter, and a pile of french fries or potato pancakes. In Wisconsin, Friday isn't a day of the week. It's a fish fry. It has been this way since before you were born, and it will be this way long after you're gone.*

## Ingredients

- The Fish
- 2 pounds cod fillets (or had-dock, perch, or walleye), cut into roughly equal portions
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- The Beer Batter
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 can (12 ounces) cold beer (a Wisconsin lager — Spotted Cow, Miller High Life, Point Special)
- 1 large egg
- For Frying
- Vegetable or peanut oil, enough for 3 inches in your pot
- Additional ½ cup flour for dredging
- Traditional Accompaniments
- Coleslaw (creamy, not vinegar-based — see our Creamy Coleslaw recipe)
- Tartar sauce (recipe below)
- Lemon wedges
- Dark rye bread with butter
- French fries or potato pancakes
- Quick Tartar Sauce
- ¾ cup mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons dill pickle relish
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon dried dill (or 1 tablespoon fresh)
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- Salt and pepper to taste

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the tartar sauce.** Stir together all tartar sauce ingredients in a small bowl. Refrigerate until ready to serve. (Better if made an hour or more ahead.)
- 2 **Prep the fish.** Pat the cod fillets completely dry with paper towels. Season both sides with salt and pepper. Dry fish = better batter adhesion. Wet fish = the batter slides right off and you'll be sad.
- 3 **Make the batter.** In a large bowl, whisk together 1½ cups flour, cornstarch, baking powder, garlic powder, paprika, salt, and pepper. Pour in the cold beer and crack in the egg. Whisk until smooth — a few small lumps are okay. The batter should be the consistency of thick pancake batter. If it's too thick, add a splash more beer. The batter should be cold — cold batter + hot oil = crispier fish. Stick it in the fridge for 10 minutes if your kitchen is warm.
- 4 **Heat the oil.** Pour oil into a deep heavy pot or Dutch oven to a depth of about 3 inches. Heat to 375°F. Use a thermometer — guessing gets you soggy fish.
- 5 **Dredge and batter.** Set up your assembly line: fish, dredging flour, batter, oil. Dredge each piece of fish in the plain flour, shake off the excess, then dip it into the beer batter, letting the excess drip off for a couple seconds.
- 6 **Fry.** Carefully lower the battered fish into the hot oil, 2–3 pieces at a time (don't crowd the pot — it drops the oil temperature). Fry for 4–6 minutes, turning once halfway through, until the batter is deeply golden brown and the fish inside is opaque and flakes easily. Transfer to a wire rack set over a sheet pan. Season with a little extra salt immediately.
- 7 **Serve the Wisconsin way.** Pile the fish on a plate alongside coleslaw, tartar sauce, lemon wedges, a couple slices of dark rye bread with butter, and fries or potato pancakes. A Brandy Old Fashioned on the side is not optional. (See our Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned recipe.)

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	15–20 minutes
Total Time	40 minutes
Difficulty	Moderate
Category	Mains / Seafood

## Midwest Nice Rating:

This isn't a potluck dish — this \*is\* the potluck. Entire communities organize their week around the Friday fish fry.

## Tips & Variations

- The Beer Matters (Sort Of): A standard American lager works perfectly. The beer provides carbonation (which makes the batter light and crispy) and a subtle malty flavor. Don't use anything too hoppy or dark — save that for drinking alongside the fish.

- Perch vs. Cod vs. Walleye: Cod is the most common at fish fries, but yellow perch is the prestige choice in Wisconsin. Walleye is the Minnesota move (and honestly, just as good — but don't tell a Wisconsinite that). Use whatever's freshest.
- Potato Pancakes: If you want the full supper club experience, make potato pancakes instead of fries. Grate russet potatoes, squeeze out all the moisture, mix with a little egg and flour, and pan-fry in butter until crispy. Serve with applesauce.
- Oil Temperature: Maintain 375°F throughout frying. If the oil gets too cool, the batter absorbs grease instead of crisping. If it's too hot, the outside burns before the fish cooks through.
- Baked Version? We don't talk about baked fish at a fish fry. That's like bringing a salad to a tailgate. It technically counts but everyone knows.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"Add a shot of vodka to the batter instead of some of the beer. Vodka evaporates faster than water, which means a crispier crust. Don't tell the church ladies — they'll have opinions."\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned (sweet), a Friday evening at a supper club where the wallpaper hasn't changed since 1974, and the comforting knowledge that every single person in this restaurant is eating the exact same thing.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Wisconsin's Friday fish fry tradition has Catholic roots — the practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent created a demand for fish dinners, and Wisconsin's large Catholic population (German, Polish, and Irish immigrants) turned Friday fish into an institution. But here's the thing: Lent ends, and the fish fries don't. Wisconsinites eat fish fry year-round, every Friday, Catholic or not. The tradition is so embedded in the culture that it's essentially secular at this point. Supper clubs — those uniquely Wisconsin dining establishments with dim lighting, relish trays, and brandy Old Fashioneds — are the spiritual home of the fish fry, but VFW halls, church basements, fire stations, bowling alleys, and even gas stations get in on the action. The Wisconsin fish fry is estimated to be a \$300 million-plus annual industry. Friday night in Wisconsin doesn't ask "where should we eat?" It asks "which fish fry?"

\* Photography note: A platter of golden beer-battered fish fillets, craggy and crispy, alongside a mound of coleslaw, lemon wedges, rye bread, and a dish of tartar sauce. Maybe a brandy Old Fashioned in the background with its obligatory garnish overload. Red-and-white checkered tablecloth. Supper club vibes — warm, nostalgic, slightly over-lit in that charming way.\*

# Sides



## Baked Beans

*Midwest US*

*A sweet and savory side dish, Baked Beans are a beloved staple at Midwestern barbecues, potlucks, and family gatherings, offering a comforting blend of beans, bacon, and a rich, tangy sauce.*

## Ingredients

- 1 lb (450g) thick-cut bacon, diced
- 1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
- 2 (28 oz / 794g) cans pork and beans (such as Bush's Best), undrained
- 1 (15 oz / 425g) can kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 cup (240ml) ketchup
- ½ cup (120ml) packed light brown sugar
- ¼ cup (60ml) molasses (unsulphured)
- 2 tbsp (30ml) apple cider vinegar
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tsp dry mustard powder
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook Bacon & Onions:** In a large, oven-safe Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot, cook the diced bacon over medium heat until crispy. Remove bacon with a slotted spoon and set aside, reserving about 2 tablespoons of bacon fat in the pot. Add the finely chopped onion to the pot and cook in the reserved bacon fat until softened and translucent, about 6-8 minutes.
- 2 **Combine Ingredients:** Add the undrained pork and beans and the drained and rinsed kidney beans to the pot. Stir in the ketchup, brown sugar, molasses, apple cider vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, dry mustard powder, and garlic powder. Mix well to combine all ingredients.
- 3 **Season:** Taste the mixture and season with salt and freshly ground black pepper as needed. Remember that bacon and pork and beans can already be salty.
- 4 **Bake:** Bring the bean mixture to a gentle simmer on the stovetop. Once simmering, remove from heat, cover the Dutch oven (or transfer to a 9x13 inch baking dish and cover with foil), and bake in a preheated oven at 350°F (175°C) for 1 hour.
- 5 **Finish & Serve:** After 1 hour, remove the cover/foil, stir the beans, and sprinkle the reserved crispy bacon bits over the top. Bake uncovered for an additional 15-30 minutes, or until the sauce is thick and bubbly and the beans are heated through. Let rest for a few minutes before serving.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8-10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	1-1.5 hours
Total Time	1.25-1.75 hours
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- For extra smokiness, add a teaspoon of liquid smoke or smoked paprika to the bean mixture.
- Add a finely chopped bell pepper (green or red) along with the onion for more vegetable flavor and color.
- If you prefer a vegetarian version, omit the bacon and use a vegetarian baked bean brand, adjusting seasonings to taste. You can add a tablespoon of smoked paprika for a smoky flavor.
- For a touch of heat, add a pinch of red pepper flakes or a dash of hot sauce.

## Did You Know?

> Baked Beans are a beloved side dish with roots in various American culinary traditions, and they hold a special place in the Midwestern heartland. Often served at summer barbecues, potlucks, and family picnics, these sweet and savory beans are a symbol of communal dining and comforting, hearty fare. The combination of different beans, a rich molasses-based sauce, and smoky bacon embodies the generous and wholesome spirit of Midwestern home cooking.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A bubbling, glazed ceramic crock or a cast iron Dutch oven filled with rich, dark baked beans, garnished with crispy bacon bits. A wooden spoon is gently resting in the dish. The dish is placed on a weathered wooden picnic table or a checkered tablecloth, bathed in warm, natural outdoor light.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a full pot to the neighborhood potluck, and quietly make sure there's enough for everyone, even if they show up late.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A sunny summer barbecue, a lively family reunion, and the sound of cicadas on a warm evening.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Baked Beans**

> "Grandma June always added a secret spoonful of strong brewed coffee (about 2 tablespoons!) to her baked beans. 'It just deepens the flavor and makes 'em extra rich,' she'd declare, 'everyone always says they're the best, but they can't quite put their finger on why!'"



## Cheesy Funeral Potatoes

*Midwest & Mountain West — Church Kitchens Everywhere*

*The casserole with the most morbid name and the most comforting soul. Creamy, cheesy, impossibly rich shredded potatoes baked under a buttery cornflake crust — served at every funeral, potluck, and church supper from Iowa to Utah, because nothing says "we care" like a 9x13 pan of carb-loaded love.*

## Ingredients

- The Potato Filling
- 1 bag (30 ounces) frozen shredded hash brown potatoes, thawed
- 1 can (10.5 ounces) cream of chicken soup (undiluted)
- 2 cups sour cream
- 2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- ½ cup unsalted butter, melted
- ½ cup finely diced yellow onion
- 2 green onions, thinly sliced
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- The Topping
- 2 cups cornflakes, lightly crushed
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, melted
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat and prep.** Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9x13-inch baking dish with butter or cooking spray.
- 2 **Mix the filling.** In a large bowl, combine the thawed hash browns, cream of chicken soup, sour cream, shredded cheddar, melted butter, diced onion, green onions, garlic powder, pepper, and salt. Stir gently until everything is evenly combined. The mixture will look gloriously rich — that's correct.
- 3 **Fill the dish.** Spread the potato mixture into the prepared baking dish, pressing gently into an even layer.
- 4 **Make the topping.** In a small bowl, toss the crushed cornflakes with the melted butter and Parmesan until the flakes are evenly coated. Scatter the mixture over the top of the potatoes.
- 5 **Bake.** Place in the oven and bake for 40–45 minutes, until the edges are bubbling, the filling is heated through, and the cornflake topping is golden and crispy.
- 6 **Rest.** Let stand for 10 minutes before serving. This allows the filling to set slightly and makes serving easier.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	10–12
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	45 minutes
Total Time	1 hour
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- **The Name:** Yes, they're really called funeral potatoes. Also known as "party potatoes," "potluck potatoes," "company potatoes," or "hash brown casserole" — but funeral potatoes is the name that stuck, because that's when you most need them.
- **Fresh Potatoes:** You can peel and shred 5 pounds of russet potatoes by hand, but frozen hash browns are the traditional (and practical) choice. No shame.
- **Ritz Cracker Topping:** Substitute crushed Ritz crackers for the cornflakes for a butterier, saltier crust. Both are authentic.
- **Ham Addition:** Fold in 1 cup of diced ham for a heartier one-dish meal.
- **Make Ahead:** Assemble without the topping and refrigerate up to 24 hours. Add the cornflake topping just before baking, and add 10–15 minutes to the bake time.
- **Lighten It Up (a little):** Swap the sour cream for Greek yogurt and use reduced-fat cheese. It won't be quite the same, but it'll still be good.
- **Slow Cooker:** Spray the insert, add the potato mixture, top with cornflakes, cover, and cook on low for 4 hours. The topping won't be as crispy, but it's perfect for transport to the church.

## Did You Know?

> Funeral potatoes got their name from the longstanding Midwestern and Mormon tradition of bringing a covered dish to a grieving family's home after a funeral. The dish needed to be hearty, crowd-feeding, inexpensive, easy to make, and transportable — funeral potatoes check every box. The recipe became so synonymous with Mormon culture that when Salt Lake City hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics, a commemorative pin featuring a casserole dish of funeral potatoes became one of the most sought-after collector's items. The dish has since transcended its somber origins and appears at every conceivable gathering — baby showers, tailgates, holiday dinners, and Wednesday night church suppers. In the Midwest, if you show up to a potluck without a casserole, you might as well not show up at all.

\* Photography note: A 9x13 glass baking dish with golden cornflake-topped funeral potatoes, one corner scooped out to show the creamy, cheesy interior. A serving spoon rests in the scooped section. Set on a potluck-style folding table with a simple cloth. Other covered dishes blurred in the background. Warm, communal, unpretentious.\*

---

### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will make three pans — one for the funeral, one for the family afterward, and one extra in case someone forgot to bring a dish.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: Baked ham, church fellowship halls, and the comforting presence of neighbors who show up when it matters.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Funeral Potatoes**

> "Grandma Barb always let her hash browns thaw completely and then squeezed out the extra moisture with paper towels. 'Nobody likes watery potatoes,' she'd say with a knowing look. 'That's the difference between soggy and spectacular.'"



## Classic Potato Salad

*Midwest US*

*A creamy, tangy, and beloved side dish, classic potato salad is a staple at Midwestern potlucks, picnics, and family gatherings, offering simple, comforting flavors.*

## Ingredients

- 2 lbs (900g) russet or Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
- 1 tbsp white vinegar
- ½ cup (120g) mayonnaise (Duke's or a good quality regional brand recommended)
- ¼ cup (60g) yellow mustard
- 2 celery stalks, finely diced
- ½ cup finely chopped red onion or green onions
- 2 hard-boiled eggs, chopped (optional)
- 1 tbsp fresh dill, chopped (optional)
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Paprika, for garnish

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook Potatoes:** Place potato cubes in a large pot and cover with cold, salted water. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 15-20 minutes, or until potatoes are fork-tender but not mushy.
- 2 **Drain & Season:** Drain the potatoes well and return them to the warm pot. Immediately sprinkle with white vinegar and gently toss. Let cool for 10-15 minutes.
- 3 **Prepare Dressing:** In a large bowl, whisk together mayonnaise, yellow mustard, finely diced celery, and chopped red or green onion. If using, add chopped hard-boiled eggs and fresh dill.
- 4 **Combine:** Add the slightly cooled potatoes to the dressing mixture. Gently fold until the potatoes are evenly coated. Be careful not to mash the potatoes too much.
- 5 **Season & Chill:** Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours, or preferably overnight, to allow the flavors to meld.
- 6 **Serve:** Before serving, give the potato salad a gentle stir. Garnish with a sprinkle of paprika and extra fresh dill, if desired.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	15-20 minutes
Total Time	35-40 minutes (plus chilling)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- For a tangier flavor, add an extra tablespoon of white vinegar or pickle juice to the dressing.
- Experiment with different herbs like chives or parsley in addition to (or instead of) dill.
- For a touch of sweetness, add a tablespoon of sweet pickle relish to the dressing.
- If the potato salad seems too dry after chilling, stir in an extra tablespoon of mayonnaise or milk.

## Did You Know?

> Classic Potato Salad is a ubiquitous dish across the American Midwest, appearing at nearly every picnic, barbecue, and potluck. Its roots trace back to German immigrants who settled in the region, bringing their love for potato-based dishes. Over time, the Midwestern version evolved into a creamy, mayonnaise-based delight, cherished for its comforting simplicity and its ability to feed a crowd. It's a true symbol of communal dining and casual hospitality.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A generous scoop of creamy potato salad in a classic ceramic bowl, garnished with a sprinkle of paprika and fresh dill. The bowl sits on a weathered wooden picnic table or a checkered tablecloth, bathed in soft, natural outdoor light. A serving spoon is gently resting in the bowl, inviting a taste.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a giant bowl to your potluck, and quietly offer you the recipe if you ask for it, but won't brag.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A sunny summer backyard BBQ, a casual church picnic, and the joyful sounds of kids playing tag in the background.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Classic Potato Salad**

> "Grandma Carol's secret? A tiny splash of celery seed (just a quarter teaspoon!) in the dressing. 'It gives it that extra somethin'-somethin',' she'd always say, 'makes it taste just like summer, even in the middle of winter!'"



# Creamed Corn

*Iowa / Nebraska (Midwest Harvest)*

*A simple yet incredibly satisfying side dish, Creamed Corn celebrates the sweet bounty of the Midwest cornfields, featuring tender kernels bathed in a rich, creamy sauce.*

## Ingredients

- 2 tbsp (30g) unsalted butter
- 1 small yellow onion, finely minced (optional)
- 4 cups (about 6-8 ears) fresh or frozen corn kernels
- ½ cup (120ml) heavy cream or half-and-half
- ¼ cup (60ml) milk (whole or 2%)
- 2 tbsp (15g) all-purpose flour (optional, for thickening)
- 1 tbsp granulated sugar (optional, to enhance sweetness)
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp black pepper
- Pinch of cayenne pepper (optional, for a subtle kick)
- Fresh chives or parsley, chopped, for garnish (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Melt Butter & Sauté Onion:** In a large skillet or Dutch oven, melt butter over medium heat. If using, add the finely minced onion and cook until softened and translucent, about 3-5 minutes.
- 2 **Add Corn:** Add the fresh or frozen corn kernels to the skillet. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 5-7 minutes, until the corn is tender and slightly bright in color.
- 3 **Thicken (Optional):** If you prefer a thicker creamed corn, sprinkle the flour over the corn and onion. Cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute to cook out the raw flour taste.
- 4 **Add Dairy & Seasonings:** Pour in the heavy cream (or half-and-half) and milk. Stir in the granulated sugar (if using), salt, black pepper, and cayenne pepper (if using).
- 5 **Simmer & Thicken:** Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer, then reduce heat to low and cook for 5-10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the sauce has thickened to your desired consistency and the flavors have melded.
- 6 **Serve:** Taste and adjust seasonings as needed. Ladle the hot creamed corn into a serving bowl. Garnish with fresh chopped chives or parsley, if desired. Serve immediately.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6-8
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	15-20 minutes
Total Time	25-30 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- For an even creamier texture, you can use an immersion blender to blend about a quarter of the corn mixture directly in the pot, then stir it back in.
- Add a tablespoon of cream cheese or mascarpone at the end for extra richness and a tangy note.
- For a smoky flavor, cook a slice or two of diced bacon until crispy, remove, then use the bacon fat to sauté the onion and corn. Crumble the bacon over the top as a garnish.
- If using fresh corn, scrape the "milk" from the cobs after removing the kernels and add it to the pan with the dairy for an intensified corn flavor.

## Did You Know?

> Creamed Corn is a classic side dish that embodies the agricultural heartland of the Midwest, especially in corn-rich states like Iowa and Nebraska. It's a testament to the region's ability to transform simple, abundant ingredients into comforting, crowd-pleasing fare. Often found at holiday dinners, Sunday suppers, and community gatherings, creamed corn is a sweet and savory staple that brings a taste of the harvest to any table.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A generous serving of creamy, golden creamed corn in a sturdy ceramic bowl, garnished with fresh green chives. The bowl sits on a distressed wooden table or a classic checkered tablecloth. Soft, warm overhead lighting emphasizes the creamy texture and vibrant color of the corn. A vintage spoon rests alongside.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a hot dish to your potluck, and quietly make sure everyone gets a second scoop.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A festive holiday dinner, a cozy Sunday lunch with family, and the satisfying feeling of a bountiful harvest.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Creamed Corn**

> "Grandma Martha always said the trick was to add a tiny pat of butter and a splash of milk \*right at the very end\* before serving. 'It makes it extra glossy and creamy,' she'd insist, 'and gives it that fresh-from-the-farm taste everyone loves!'"



## Creamy Coleslaw

*Midwest — Every Backyard Barbecue*

*Cool, crisp, and creamy with just enough tang to cut through any rich main dish — this is the coleslaw that appears at every Midwestern cookout, fish fry, and potluck, the faithful sidekick that never steals the spotlight but always gets finished first.*

## Ingredients

- The Slaw
- 1 medium head green cabbage (about 2 pounds), cored and finely shredded
- 2 large carrots, peeled and grated
- ½ small red onion, very thinly sliced
- The Dressing
- ¾ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup sour cream
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon celery seed
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Pinch of cayenne (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the vegetables.** In a large bowl, combine the shredded cabbage, grated carrots, and sliced red onion. Toss to mix.
- 2 **Make the dressing.** In a medium bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise, sour cream, apple cider vinegar, sugar, Dijon mustard, celery seed, salt, pepper, and cayenne (if using) until smooth and well combined.
- 3 **Dress the slaw.** Pour the dressing over the cabbage mixture and toss thoroughly until everything is evenly coated.
- 4 **Chill.** Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour before serving. This resting time allows the cabbage to soften slightly and the flavors to meld. The slaw will also release some liquid — give it a good stir before serving.
- 5 **Taste and adjust.** Before serving, taste and add more salt, vinegar, or sugar as needed. The slaw should be creamy, tangy, and just barely sweet.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8–10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Chill Time	1 hour (minimum)
Total Time	1 hour 15 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- **Make Ahead:** Coleslaw is best made 2–4 hours ahead. It continues to improve as it chills. Beyond 24 hours, the cabbage starts to get too soft.
- **Vinegar Slaw:** For a tangier, lighter version, skip the mayo and dress with apple cider vinegar, oil, sugar, salt, and celery seed.
- **Add Crunch:** Toss in ½ cup of sunflower seeds, sliced almonds, or crumbled bacon just before serving.
- **Apple Slaw:** Add 1 thinly sliced Granny Smith apple for a sweet-tart autumn variation.
- **Spicy Version:** Add 1 minced jalapeño and extra cayenne for a slaw with kick.

## Did You Know?

> Coleslaw arrived in America with Dutch immigrants (the name comes from the Dutch \*koolsla\*, meaning "cabbage salad"), but the Midwest made it an institution. In a region where cabbage grows abundantly and backyard barbecues are a way of life from May through October, coleslaw became the indispensable side dish — paired with pulled pork, fried fish, grilled brats, and everything in between. In Wisconsin, coleslaw is served alongside the Friday night fish fry, a tradition so deeply embedded in the culture that restaurants keep their coleslaw recipes under lock and key.

\* Photography note: A white ceramic bowl filled with creamy coleslaw, the purple and green of the cabbage and orange of the carrot peeking through the creamy dressing. Set on a picnic table with red-checked cloth. Grilled items blurred in the background. Bright outdoor summer light.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5 (Will make a huge bowl for the neighborhood cookout and quietly refill it twice without mentioning you brought extra — because running out would be embarrassing for everyone.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: Pulled pork sandwiches, Friday fish fry, backyard barbecues, and the sound of kids playing in sprinklers on a hot summer day.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Coleslaw**

> "Grandma Mae always made her coleslaw the night before. 'It needs to marry,' she'd say, tucking it in the back of the fridge. 'The cabbage softens just enough, the flavors get friendly. Day-of coleslaw is like meeting a stranger. Next-day coleslaw is family.'"



# Green Bean Casserole

*Midwest — The Thanksgiving Table*

*The dish that launched a thousand potlucks. Tender green beans in a velvety mushroom cream sauce, topped with a shattering layer of crispy fried onions — this is the Midwest's most beloved side dish, and no holiday table is complete without it.*

## Ingredients

- The Casserole
- 2 pounds fresh green beans, trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces (or 2 cans [14.5 oz each] green beans, drained, or 2 bags [12 oz each] frozen cut green beans, thawed)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 ounces cremini mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 medium shallot, finely diced
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 cup whole milk or half-and-half
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt (adjust to taste)
- Pinch of ground nutmeg
- The Topping
- 1½ cups French's crispy fried onions (or homemade — see tips)
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese (optional, but great)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prep the green beans.** If using fresh: bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Blanch the green beans for 5 minutes until crisp-tender and bright green. Drain and immediately plunge into ice water to stop cooking. Drain well and set aside. (If using canned or frozen, simply drain/thaw well.)
- 2 **Cook the mushrooms.** Preheat oven to 375°F. In a large oven-safe skillet or saucepan, melt the butter over medium-high heat. Add the mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until golden and most of the moisture has evaporated, about 5–6 minutes.
- 3 **Build the sauce.** Add the shallot and garlic to the mushrooms and cook 1 minute until fragrant. Sprinkle the flour over the vegetables and stir constantly for 1 minute to cook out the raw flour taste. Gradually pour in the chicken broth and milk, whisking steadily to prevent lumps. Add the soy sauce, pepper, salt, and nutmeg.
- 4 **Simmer until thick.** Bring the sauce to a gentle boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 3–4 minutes, stirring frequently, until the sauce thickens enough to coat the back of a spoon.
- 5 **Combine.** Fold the green beans into the sauce until evenly coated. Transfer to a 9x13-inch baking dish (or leave in the oven-safe skillet).
- 6 **Bake.** Place in the oven and bake uncovered for 20 minutes until the edges are bubbling.
- 7 **Add the topping.** Remove from the oven. Scatter the fried onions (and Parmesan, if using) evenly over the top. Return to the oven for 5–8 minutes more, until the onions are deeply golden and the casserole is bubbling throughout.
- 8 **Rest and serve.** Let the casserole rest for 5 minutes before serving. The sauce will thicken slightly as it cools.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8–10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	35 minutes
Total Time	50 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- Fresh vs. Canned: Fresh green beans make a noticeably better casserole — crisper texture, brighter flavor. But we won't judge the canned version. It's how grandma made it, and grandma was right about a lot of things.
- Homemade Fried Onions: Thinly slice 2 large onions into rings, toss with ½ cup flour and a pinch of salt, then shallow-fry in ½ inch of oil at 375°F until golden and crispy. Drain on paper towels. Worth the effort for holidays.
- Make Ahead: Assemble the casserole (without the fried onion topping) up to a day ahead. Refrigerate covered. Add 10 minutes to the baking time and put the onions on in the last 5 minutes.
- Extra Luxurious: Stir ½ cup sour cream into the sauce for an even richer, tangier version.

- Bacon Addition: Fold ½ cup crumbled, crispy bacon into the filling for a smoky upgrade.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Green bean casserole was invented in 1955 by Dorcas Reilly in the Campbell's Soup Company test kitchen in Camden, New Jersey. Tasked with creating a quick, easy recipe using ingredients most Americans already had in their pantry, she combined cream of mushroom soup, canned green beans, and Durkee (now French's) fried onions. The recipe was published on the back of the soup can, and the rest is Thanksgiving history. Today, Americans buy approximately 40 million cans of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup each year during the holiday season, and Reilly's recipe card is preserved in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. She called it "a beloved American classic" — and the Midwest, which adopted it most fervently, would agree.

\* Photography note: Oval ceramic baking dish with golden, bubbling green bean casserole — crispy fried onions piled on top. A large serving spoon scoops out a portion, showing the creamy interior. Set on a wooden trivet with a linen napkin. Thanksgiving table setting hints in the background. Warm, golden overhead lighting.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring this to Thanksgiving even when the host says 'don't bring anything' — because some traditions are non-negotiable.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: Turkey, cranberry sauce, the entire Thanksgiving table, and approximately 40 million cans of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup sold annually.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Green Bean Casserole**

> "Grandma Helen always used fresh green beans from her garden and made her own cream of mushroom soup from scratch. 'The canned stuff works fine,' she'd say with a wink, 'but fresh makes it special. That's how you get people asking for the recipe.'"



# Mac and Cheese

*Midwest — Every Table, Every Occasion*

*Forget the blue box — this is the real thing. Elbow macaroni swimming in a velvety, three-cheese sauce, topped with a buttery breadcrumb crust that shatters with each bite. It's the dish that turns adults into children and children into believers.*

## Ingredients

- The Pasta
- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 1 tablespoon fine sea salt (for pasta water)
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- The Cheese Sauce
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 3 cups whole milk, warmed
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1½ teaspoons fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- 1 cup mild cheddar cheese, shredded
- 1 cup Gruyère cheese, shredded
- 4 ounces cream cheese, cubed
- The Topping
- 1½ cups panko breadcrumbs
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- ½ cup sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
- ¼ teaspoon paprika
- Pinch of fine sea salt

## Instructions

- 1 Cook the pasta.** Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add salt and pasta. Cook until just barely al dente — about 1 minute less than package directions. Drain and toss with 1 tablespoon butter to prevent sticking. Set aside.
- 2 Make the roux.** In a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot, melt 5 tablespoons butter over medium heat. Whisk in flour and cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly, until it turns light golden and smells nutty.
- 3 Build the sauce.** Gradually pour in warm milk and cream, whisking continuously to prevent lumps. Add mustard, garlic powder, onion powder, cayenne, nutmeg, salt, and pepper. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook for 5–7 minutes, whisking often, until sauce thickens and coats the back of a spoon.
- 4 Add the cheese.** Remove pot from heat. Add the cheddar cheeses, Gruyère, and cream cheese. Stir until completely melted and silky smooth. Taste and adjust seasoning.
- 5 Combine.** Fold the cooked pasta into the cheese sauce until every piece is coated. Transfer to a buttered 9x13-inch baking dish.
- 6 Prepare the topping.** In a small bowl, combine panko, melted butter, shredded cheddar, paprika, and salt. Toss until breadcrumbs are evenly coated.
- 7 Top and bake.** Preheat oven to 375°F. Spread the breadcrumb mixture evenly over the mac and cheese. Bake for 25–30 minutes until the top is golden brown and the edges are bubbling.
- 8 Rest and serve.** Let cool for 5 minutes before serving. The sauce will thicken slightly as it rests.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8–10
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	35 minutes
Total Time	55 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- Cheese Quality Matters: Use block cheese and shred it yourself. Pre-shredded cheese contains anti-caking agents that can make your sauce grainy.
- Low and Slow: Don't rush the sauce. High heat can cause the cheese to break and become oily.
- Pasta Shape: Cavatappi, shells, or rotini work beautifully — the curves and ridges catch more sauce.
- Bacon Lover's: Fold in 1 cup crispy bacon pieces and top with more before baking.
- Buffalo Mac: Add ½ cup buffalo sauce to the cheese sauce and top with crumbled blue cheese.
- Lobster Mac: Fold in 1 pound of cooked lobster meat for special occasions.
- Smoky Version: Swap half the cheddar for smoked Gouda.
- Stovetop Only: Skip the baking — it's delicious straight from the pot.

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### Did You Know?

> While Thomas Jefferson is often credited with popularizing macaroni and cheese in America after encountering it in Italy and France, the Midwest made it a religion. During the Great Depression, Kraft introduced its boxed macaroni and cheese dinner in 1937, selling for 19 cents and feeding a family of four. It became a lifeline for struggling families and never left American tables. The from-scratch version remained the church potluck and holiday standard across the Heartland, with every family claiming their grandmother's recipe was best. In Wisconsin alone, per capita cheese consumption is 25% higher than the national average — and much of it ends up in mac and cheese.

\* Photography note: Cast iron skillet overflowing with golden-topped mac and cheese, breadcrumbs perfectly toasted. A wooden spoon pulls up a stretchy, cheesy scoop. Steam rising. Set on a wooden board with a checkered napkin. Warm, homestyle kitchen lighting.\*

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### Midwest Nice Rating

5/5 (Will make a double batch — one for dinner and one to drop off at the neighbor's who just had a baby, because that's what you do.)

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### Pairs Well With

Pairs well with: A cozy winter evening, a good book, and the knowledge that tomorrow's lunch is already sorted.

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### Grandma's Secret: Mac And Cheese

> "Grandma Ruth never used just one cheese — she'd say 'variety makes it sing!' Her secret was adding a tablespoon of cream cheese to the sauce. 'Makes it silkier than silk,' she'd whisper, 'and nobody can ever quite figure out why theirs doesn't taste the same.'"



## Butter & Salt Corn on the Cob

*Midwest — The Corn Belt*

*August in the Midwest means one thing above all else: sweet corn season. Picked that morning, boiled just until tender, slathered in butter, and showered in salt — it's the simplest recipe in this book and possibly the most perfect.*

## Ingredients

- 6 ears fresh sweet corn, husked and silk removed
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened (plus more at the table)
- Flaky sea salt or kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 **Boil the water.** Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Do NOT add salt to the water — salt toughens the corn kernels during cooking.
- 2 **Cook the corn.** Gently add the ears of corn to the boiling water. Return to a boil and cook for 4–7 minutes. Fresh-picked corn needs only 4 minutes; corn that's a day or two old benefits from 6–7. The kernels should be tender and bright yellow when done.
- 3 **Butter and salt.** Remove ears with tongs and place on a platter. Immediately rub with softened butter while the corn is still steaming hot — the butter will melt and pool in the kernels. Season generously with salt and pepper if desired.
- 4 **Serve instantly.** Corn on the cob waits for no one. Provide corn holders, extra butter, and a salt shaker at the table.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6
Prep Time	5 minutes
Cook Time	5–7 minutes
Total Time	12 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- The Freshness Rule: The sugars in corn start converting to starch the moment it's picked. The fresher the corn, the sweeter it is. If you can get it from a roadside stand or farmers' market that morning, you'll taste the difference.
- Grilled Corn: Pull back the husks (leaving them attached), remove silk, re-wrap in husks, and soak in water for 30 minutes. Grill over medium heat for 15–20 minutes, turning occasionally. The slight char is magnificent.
- Mexican Street Style (Elote): Slather grilled corn with mayo, sprinkle with cotija cheese, chili powder, and lime juice for a Midwestern-meets-Mexican crossover.
- Herb Butter: Mix softened butter with chopped fresh chives, dill, and a squeeze of lemon for an herb compound butter.
- Oven Roasted: Wrap individual ears in foil with butter and roast at 425°F for 20–25 minutes.

## Did You Know?

> The Midwest is the beating heart of American corn country. Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, and Indiana produce billions of bushels of corn annually, and while most of that is field corn destined for livestock feed and ethanol, the sweet corn varieties grown for eating are a source of intense regional pride. In the late summer, roadside stands dot every highway, hand-painted signs advertising "SWEET CORN" are as common as traffic signals, and the question "Is it Silver Queen or Peaches and Cream?" is a serious

conversation starter. Many Midwesterners can tell you the exact farm their favorite corn comes from, and the local sweet corn festival — found in nearly every small town — is a social event rivaling the county fair.

\* Photography note: Three ears of buttered corn on a rustic wooden cutting board, glistening with melted butter. Salt crystals visible. One ear with a bite taken out. A small ramekin of butter. Outdoor summer evening light, a grill blurred in the far background. Bright, fresh, summery.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will drive 20 miles out of the way to stop at that one farm stand with the best corn, then bring home extra ears for the elderly couple next door who can't drive that far anymore.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: Grilled anything, August sunsets, and competitive debates about whose local farm grows the sweetest corn.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Corn On The Cob**

> "Grandma Betty always added a tablespoon of sugar and a splash of milk to the boiling water. 'Makes it even sweeter,' she'd say with a wink. 'Course, if you get it fresh enough, you don't need any help — but a little insurance never hurt anybody.'"



## Scalloped Potatoes

*Midwest — The Sunday Supper Table*

*Layers of thinly sliced potatoes bathed in a silky, garlicky cream sauce, baked until the top turns golden and the edges bubble with crispy, cheesy goodness. This is comfort food at its most elemental — simple ingredients transformed into something transcendent.*

## Ingredients

- The Potatoes
- 4 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced 1/8-inch thick
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- The Cream Sauce
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon white pepper
- 2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (divided)
- 1/2 cup Gruyère cheese, shredded
- For the Dish
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened (for greasing)
- Fresh chives, chopped (for garnish)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prep the potatoes.** Slice the potatoes uniformly thin — a mandoline works wonders here. Place sliced potatoes in a large bowl of cold water to prevent browning while you make the sauce.
- 2 **Make the cream sauce.** Melt butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add garlic and cook for 1 minute until fragrant. Whisk in flour and cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Gradually pour in milk and cream, whisking continuously to prevent lumps.
- 3 **Season and thicken.** Add mustard, nutmeg, salt, and white pepper. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook for 5–7 minutes until the sauce thickens and coats the back of a spoon. Remove from heat and stir in 1 cup of cheddar and all the Gruyère until melted and smooth.
- 4 **Prepare the dish.** Preheat oven to 375°F. Generously butter a 9x13-inch baking dish. Drain the potatoes thoroughly and pat dry with paper towels.
- 5 **Layer.** Arrange one-third of the potato slices in overlapping rows in the prepared dish. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Pour one-third of the cream sauce evenly over the potatoes. Repeat layers twice more, ending with sauce.
- 6 **Top and cover.** Sprinkle remaining 1 cup cheddar over the top. Cover tightly with aluminum foil.
- 7 **Bake covered.** Place on a rimmed baking sheet (to catch drips) and bake for 45 minutes.
- 8 **Finish uncovered.** Remove foil and continue baking for 25–30 minutes until the top is deeply golden and bubbling, and a knife slides easily into the center.
- 9 **Rest and serve.** Let stand for 10 minutes before serving — this allows the sauce to set. Garnish with fresh chives.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8–10
Prep Time	25 minutes
Cook Time	1 hour 15 minutes
Total Time	1 hour 40 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- Even Slicing: A mandoline is your best friend here. Uneven slices lead to some potatoes being mushy while others stay crunchy. Aim for 1/8-inch thickness.
- Potato Choice: Yukon Golds hold their shape beautifully while becoming creamy. Russets work but may break down more. Avoid waxy red potatoes.
- Ham Addition: Layer thin slices of ham between the potato layers for a hearty main-dish version.
- Make Ahead: Assemble completely, cover, and refrigerate up to 24 hours. Add 15–20 minutes to the covered baking time.
- Cheese Variations: Swap in fontina, white cheddar, or smoked Gouda for different flavor profiles.

- Crispy Top: For extra crunch, mix ½ cup panko with 2 tablespoons melted butter and sprinkle over the cheese topping before the final uncovered bake.

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### **Did You Know?**

> The term "scalloped" doesn't refer to the shellfish at all — it comes from the French "escalope," meaning a thin slice of meat or, in this case, vegetables. Scalloped potatoes became a Midwestern staple in the early 1900s as dairy farming flourished across Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. The dish was economical, filling, and showcased the region's abundant cream and cheese. Church cookbooks from the era often listed multiple variations, each claiming to be "the best." The debate between scalloped potatoes (cream sauce) and au gratin (cheese and breadcrumbs) continues to this day, though most Midwesterners sensibly add cheese to both.

\* Photography note: Oval ceramic baking dish with golden-brown scalloped potatoes, cheese bubbling at the edges. A portion has been scooped out, revealing the layered creamy interior. Fresh chives scattered on top. Rustic wooden table with a blue linen napkin. Warm, inviting overhead lighting.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will make this for Sunday dinner even though it takes an hour and a half, because family deserves the effort — and leftovers make Monday better.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: Roasted ham, Easter Sunday, and the satisfied silence that falls over the dinner table when everyone's too busy eating to talk.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Scalloped Potatoes**

> "Grandma Dorothy always rubbed the baking dish with a cut clove of garlic before buttering it. 'Just a whisper of garlic,' she'd say, 'not enough to taste, but enough to make people wonder what makes yours so special.' She'd smile and never tell."



## Sweet Potato Casserole

*Midwest — The Holiday Sideboard*

*Is it a side dish or dessert? The Midwest says yes to both. Silky mashed sweet potatoes kissed with warm spices, brown sugar, and vanilla, crowned with a toasted marshmallow dome and a pecan streusel that shatters on contact. This is the dish everyone secretly hopes you'll bring to Thanksgiving.*

## Ingredients

- The Sweet Potato Filling
- 4 pounds sweet potatoes (about 6 medium)
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened
- ¾ cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ cup whole milk or heavy cream
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- The Pecan Streusel Topping
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup packed light brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch of fine sea salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- The Marshmallow Topping
- 3 cups mini marshmallows (or large marshmallows, halved)

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook the sweet potatoes.** Preheat oven to 400°F. Pierce sweet potatoes all over with a fork. Place on a foil-lined baking sheet and bake for 50–60 minutes until completely tender when pierced with a knife. (Alternatively, peel, cube, and boil in salted water for 15–20 minutes until tender, then drain well.)
- 2 **Prepare the filling.** Reduce oven to 350°F. Scoop the flesh from the baked sweet potatoes (discard skins) into a large bowl. While still hot, add butter and mash until smooth. Add brown sugar, milk, eggs, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and salt. Beat with an electric mixer until fluffy and smooth, about 2 minutes.
- 3 **Make the streusel.** In a medium bowl, combine pecans, flour, brown sugar, cinnamon, and salt. Drizzle with melted butter and toss with a fork until crumbly.
- 4 **Assemble.** Butter a 9x13-inch baking dish. Spread the sweet potato mixture evenly in the dish, smoothing the top.
- 5 **First bake.** Sprinkle the pecan streusel evenly over half of the casserole (this creates two topping zones). Bake for 25 minutes until the filling is set and the streusel is golden.
- 6 **Add marshmallows.** Remove from oven. Arrange marshmallows over the other half of the casserole (or sprinkle a layer over everything if you prefer). Return to oven for 8–10 minutes until marshmallows are puffed and beautifully golden brown.
- 7 **Broil for color (optional).** For extra toasty marshmallows, place under the broiler for 1–2 minutes. Watch constantly — they go from golden to burned in seconds.
- 8 **Serve immediately.** This casserole is best served warm, while the marshmallows are still soft and gooey.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	10–12
Prep Time	30 minutes
Cook Time	50 minutes
Total Time	1 hour 20 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Sides

## Tips & Variations

- Best Sweet Potatoes: Garnet or Jewel varieties (the ones with reddish-orange skin and deep orange flesh) have the sweetest flavor and creamiest texture.
- Make Ahead: Prepare the filling up to 2 days ahead and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before topping and baking, adding 10 minutes to the bake time.
- Streusel Only: Skip the marshmallows entirely for a more sophisticated presentation. Cover the whole top with streusel.
- Marshmallow Only: The purists' version — just marshmallows, toasted to perfection.
- Bourbon Addition: Add 2 tablespoons bourbon to the filling for a grown-up twist.
- Maple Version: Replace brown sugar with pure maple syrup for a deeper, more complex sweetness.
- Individual Portions: Bake in ramekins for elegant single servings. Reduce bake time by 10 minutes.

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### Did You Know?

> The marshmallow-topped sweet potato casserole is a distinctly American invention, born in the early 1900s when the Angelus Marshmallow Company published a booklet of recipes to promote their product. The pairing caught on immediately, especially across the Midwest and South. By the 1950s, no Thanksgiving was complete without it. The great debate — marshmallows vs. streusel vs. both — has divided families for generations. Savvy Midwestern cooks learned to do half and half, keeping the peace while satisfying everyone. The dish sits in that delicious gray area between side and dessert, and honestly, no one's complaining.

\* Photography note: Rectangular ceramic baking dish with sweet potato casserole — half topped with golden toasted marshmallows, half with crunchy pecan streusel. A serving spoon reveals the creamy orange interior. Autumn leaves and small pumpkins in the background. Warm, cozy holiday lighting.\*

---

### Midwest Nice Rating

5/5 (Will diplomatically make half with marshmallows and half with streusel so nobody has to pick sides at Thanksgiving — family harmony is worth the extra effort.)

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### Pairs Well With

Pairs well with: Turkey and gravy, the great marshmallow-versus-streusel debate, and aunts who insist 'it's practically a vegetable.'

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### Grandma's Secret: Sweet Potato Casserole

> "Grandma Evelyn always added a splash of fresh orange juice to her sweet potato filling. 'Brightens the whole thing right up,' she'd say, zesting a little orange peel on top before the marshmallows. 'Makes it taste like sunshine, even in November.'"

# **Breads & Baked Goods**



# Banana Bread

*Midwest US*

*A sweet, moist, and wonderfully fragrant quick bread, Banana Bread is a comforting staple in Midwestern homes, cherished for its simplicity and ability to turn overripe bananas into a delicious treat.*

## Ingredients

- 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp baking soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon (optional)
- ½ cup (113g) unsalted butter, melted
- 1 cup (200g) granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 3 very ripe medium bananas, mashed (about 1 cup)
- Optional: ½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans, ½ cup chocolate chips

## Instructions

- 1 Preheat Oven & Prepare Pan:** Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease and flour a 9x5 inch (23x13 cm) loaf pan, or line with parchment paper.
- 2 Combine Dry Ingredients:** In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, salt, and cinnamon (if using).
- 3 Combine Wet Ingredients:** In a large bowl, whisk together the melted butter and granulated sugar until well combined. Stir in the lightly beaten eggs and vanilla extract.
- 4 Add Bananas:** Add the mashed bananas to the wet ingredients and mix until just combined.
- 5 Combine All:** Gradually add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients, mixing with a wooden spoon or spatula until just combined. Be careful not to overmix; a few lumps are fine. If using, gently fold in the chopped nuts or chocolate chips.
- 6 Pour & Bake:** Pour the batter into the prepared loaf pan, spreading it evenly.
- 7 Bake:** Bake for 50-60 minutes, or until a wooden skewer or toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. If the top starts to brown too quickly, you can loosely tent it with aluminum foil.
- 8 Cool & Serve:** Let the banana bread cool in the pan for 10-15 minutes before inverting it onto a wire rack to cool completely. Slice and serve warm or at room temperature.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8-10
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	50-60 minutes
Total Time	65-75 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breads

## Tips & Variations

- For a richer flavor, use brown sugar instead of granulated sugar, or a mix of both.
- Add a tablespoon of buttermilk or sour cream to the wet ingredients for an extra moist crumb.
- Experiment with different spices like nutmeg or a pinch of ground cloves for added warmth.
- For an extra banana flavor, roast the bananas in their peels in the oven at 300°F (150°C) for 15-20 minutes until they are black, then cool, peel, and mash.

## Did You Know?

> Banana bread became widely popular in the United States during the 1930s, especially with the rise of baking powder and baking soda, making quick breads easier to prepare. In the Midwest, it quickly became a household staple, a practical and delicious way to use up overripe bananas. It's a comforting, versatile treat often shared with neighbors, brought to potlucks, or enjoyed with a cup of coffee, embodying the region's resourceful and home-baking traditions.



\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A freshly baked loaf of golden-brown banana bread, sliced to reveal its moist interior, on a wooden cutting board. A few whole bananas (one slightly overripe) and a crumpled linen napkin in the background. Soft, natural light from a window, highlighting the warmth and comforting texture.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bake a loaf for a new neighbor, or bring to a friend who's having a tough week, no questions asked.)

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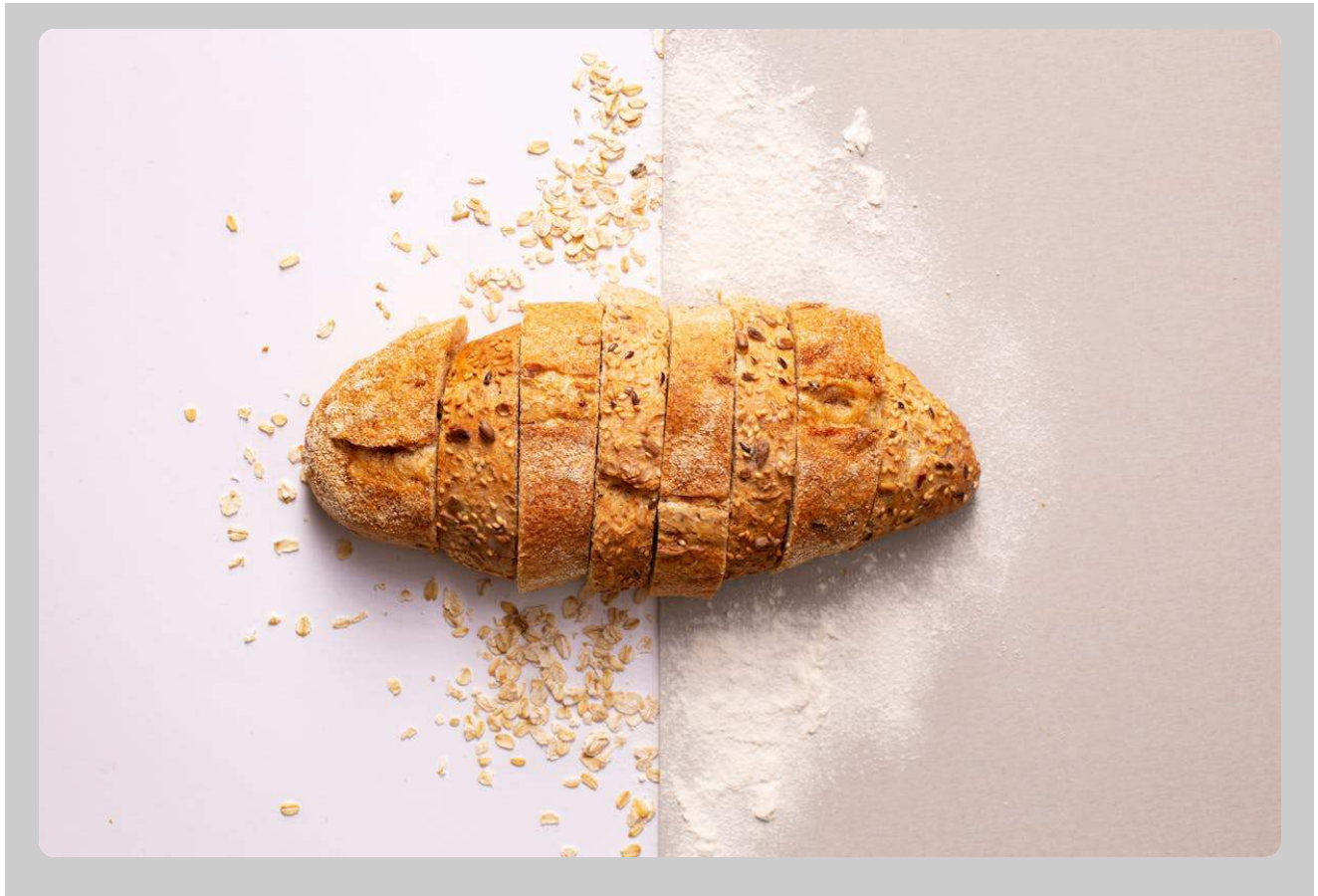
### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A quiet morning with a cup of coffee, an afternoon snack with a glass of milk, and the sweet nostalgia of childhood memories.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Banana Bread**

> "Grandma Carol always added a tiny splash of orange juice (about 2 tablespoons) to her banana bread batter. 'It just brightens up the banana flavor,' she'd insist, 'and makes it taste extra fresh, like a little bit of sunshine!'"



## Beer Bread

*Wisconsin, Michigan, Across the Midwest — Wherever There's a Spare Beer*

*Three cups of flour, a can of beer, and about fifteen minutes of actual effort produce a dense, golden, slightly boozy loaf with a buttery crust that shatters when you tear into it. It's the bread equivalent of showing up to a party in jeans and still being the best-dressed person there.*

## Ingredients

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 can or bottle (12 ounces) beer, at room temperature (see notes on beer choice)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat.** Crank your oven to 375°F. Grease a standard 9 × 5-inch loaf pan generously with butter or cooking spray.
- 2 **Mix the dry.** In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt.
- 3 **Add the beer.** Pour in the beer and stir with a wooden spoon until just combined. The batter will be thick, shaggy, and slightly lumpy. It should look like it's not quite ready. It is. Don't overmix. The carbonation in the beer is doing the leavening work — don't knock all the bubbles out.
- 4 **Pan it.** Scrape the batter into the prepared loaf pan and spread it roughly even. It doesn't need to be pretty. Pour the melted butter over the top of the batter, letting it pool around the edges.
- 5 **Bake.** Bake for 50–55 minutes, until the top is deeply golden brown and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. The butter will have created a shatteringly crispy, golden crust on top.
- 6 **Cool briefly and devour.** Let the bread cool in the pan for 10 minutes, then turn it out onto a cutting board. Slice thick. Eat warm with more butter. Reflect on how something this easy has no right to be this good.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	1 loaf
Prep Time	5 minutes
Bake Time	50–55 minutes
Total Time	1 hour
Difficulty	Embarrassingly Easy
Category	Breads

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Shows up to every party. The recipe has three ingredients. Even your cousin who burns water can make this.

## Tips & Variations

- Beer Choice Matters: A standard lager or pale ale (Miller, PBR, Spotted Cow if you're in Wisconsin and feeling proud) makes a classic, mildly flavored loaf. A wheat beer adds softness. An IPA adds bitterness and hops flavor — good if you like that, intense if you don't. A dark stout makes a heavier, more complex bread. Start with whatever's in your fridge.
- Cheesy Beer Bread: Fold in 1 cup of shredded sharp cheddar cheese. Sprinkle another ½ cup on top before baking. This is the correct move.
- Herb Version: Add 2 teaspoons of dried Italian herbs and 2 minced garlic cloves to the batter.
- Honey Beer Bread: Replace the sugar with 3 tablespoons of honey. Drizzle more honey on top with the melted butter.

- Don't Skip the Butter on Top: It's not optional. The melted butter poured over the batter before baking is what creates the crunchy, golden-brown crust that makes this bread special. Without it, you just have a sad, pale loaf.

- Serve With: Beer cheese soup (page reference to Wisconsin Beer Cheese Soup), chili, or just a bowl of good butter.

> Grandma's Secret: \*"Use a beer you actually like drinking — if you wouldn't drink it, don't bake with it. And let the beer come to room temperature first. Cold beer shocks the baking powder and you'll get a denser loaf."\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

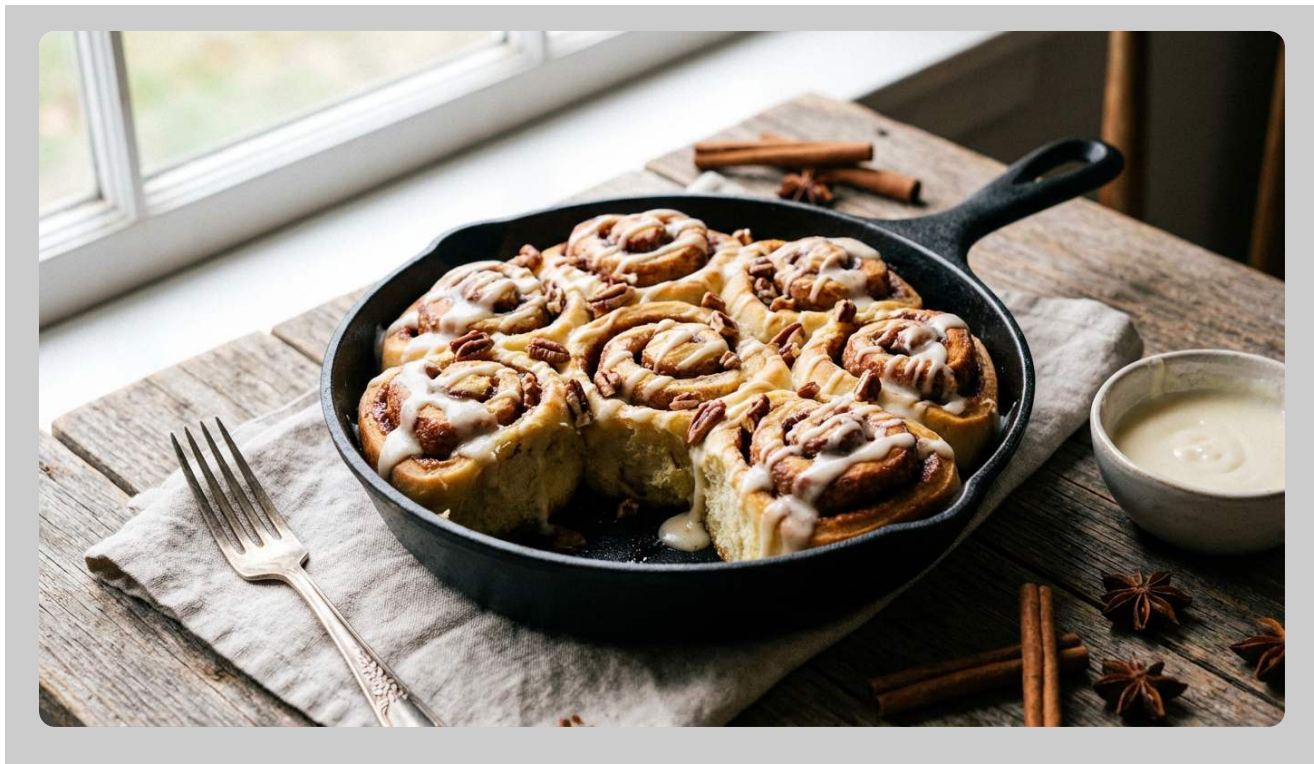
The rest of the six-pack that donated the one beer to the bread, a Packers game, and the quiet satisfaction of telling everyone you "baked bread from scratch" without mentioning it took five minutes.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Beer bread's popularity in the Midwest tracks perfectly with two regional obsessions: beer and not making things complicated. The recipe likely evolved from quick bread traditions (baking powder breads that don't require yeast or rising time) and got its boozy twist sometime in the mid-20th century, when home brewers and practical cooks realized that beer's carbonation and yeast could serve as a leavening agent. Wisconsin claims a special relationship with beer bread — which makes sense, given that the state has more breweries per capita than nearly anywhere else in America. In the 1970s and 80s, beer bread mixes became popular gift items at Midwestern craft fairs and church bazaars, packaged in mason jars with cute labels. The mix was literally just flour, sugar, and baking powder — you were paying \$8 for someone to pre-measure three ingredients. The Midwest: where entrepreneurship meets audacity.

\* Photography note: A golden loaf of beer bread on a rustic cutting board, top cracked and crunchy from the butter, one thick slice cut and laid on its side to show the tender crumb. An open beer bottle nearby. Crumbs on the board. Casual, effortless, "I threw this together" energy.\*



# Cinnamon Rolls with Cream Cheese Frosting

*Across the Midwest — Church Basements to Farm Kitchens*

*Soft, pillowy spirals of enriched dough layered with a sinful amount of cinnamon-sugar butter, baked until golden and gooey, then drowned in a thick cream cheese frosting that melts into every crevice. The smell alone could sell a house. The taste could end a feud.*

## Ingredients

- The Dough
- 1 cup whole milk, warmed to 110°F
- 2¼ teaspoons active dry yeast (1 packet)
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup unsalted butter, melted and slightly cooled
- 2 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 4 to 4½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- The Filling
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened to spreadable
- ¾ cup packed dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons ground cinnamon
- Pinch of salt
- The Cream Cheese Frosting
- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1½ cups powdered sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

## Instructions

- 1 Bloom the yeast.** In a large bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer, combine the warm milk, yeast, and a pinch of the sugar. Let it sit for 5–8 minutes until it's foamy and smells yeasty. If nothing happens, your yeast is dead — start over with a fresh packet.
- 2 Make the dough.** Add the remaining sugar, melted butter, eggs, and vanilla to the yeast mixture. Stir to combine. Add 4 cups of the flour and the salt. Mix with a dough hook on low speed (or by hand with a wooden spoon) until a shaggy dough forms. Increase to medium speed and knead for 6–8 minutes, adding the remaining ½ cup flour a tablespoon at a time if the dough is too sticky. You want a dough that's soft and slightly tacky but pulls away from the sides of the bowl.
- 3 First rise.** Shape the dough into a ball, place it in a greased bowl, cover with plastic wrap or a clean towel, and let rise in a warm spot until doubled in size, about 1 to 1½ hours.
- 4 Roll and fill.** Punch down the dough. On a lightly floured surface, roll it out into a rectangle roughly 16 × 12 inches. Spread the softened butter evenly over the entire surface, leaving a ¼-inch border at the far edge. Mix the brown sugar, cinnamon, and pinch of salt together, then sprinkle evenly over the butter. Press it in gently with your hands.
- 5 Roll it up.** Starting from the long edge closest to you, roll the dough into a tight log. Pinch the seam closed. Using a sharp knife or unflavored dental floss (seriously — it works perfectly), cut the log into 12 equal pieces.
- 6 Second rise.** Place the rolls cut-side up in a greased 9 × 13-inch baking pan. Cover and let rise for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until the rolls are puffy and touching each other.
- 7 Bake.** Preheat your oven to 350°F. Bake the rolls for 22–28 minutes, until the tops are golden brown and the centers are cooked through. Don't overbake — slightly underdone is better than dry.
- 8 Frost immediately.** While the rolls bake, beat together the cream cheese, butter, powdered sugar, vanilla, and salt until smooth and fluffy. The moment the rolls come out of the oven, spread the frosting generously over the hot rolls. Watch it melt into the crevices. Try not to eat the entire pan.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	12 large rolls
Prep Time	30 minutes
Rise Time	2–2½ hours (two rises)
Bake Time	22–28 minutes
Total Time	About 3½ hours
Difficulty	Moderate
Category	Breads / Breakfast

### Midwest Nice Rating:

You could show up to a stranger's house with a pan of these and leave with a dinner invitation and a new best friend.

## Tips & Variations

- Overnight Method: After cutting and placing in the pan, cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. In the morning, pull the pan out, let the rolls come to room temperature and puff up (about 45–60 minutes), then bake. Fresh cinnamon rolls without a 5 AM alarm.
- Caramel Pecan Sticky Buns: Before placing rolls in the pan, pour a mixture of ½ cup melted butter, ¾ cup brown sugar, and 2 tablespoons corn syrup over the bottom of the pan. Scatter with pecans. Bake as directed, then flip immediately. Midwest decadence.
- Apple Cinnamon: Add a layer of thinly sliced, tart apples (Granny Smith or Honeycrisp from Michigan) over the cinnamon-sugar before rolling.
- The Secret Ingredient: A tablespoon of heavy cream poured over the rolls just before baking makes the centers impossibly gooey.
- Don't Skip Dark Brown Sugar: It has more molasses than light brown sugar, which means deeper, more caramelized flavor. This matters.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"Put a pan of boiling water on the bottom rack of the oven while the rolls bake. The steam keeps them soft. And never, ever use margarine in the frosting — cream cheese frosting made with margarine is just sweet grease."\*

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### Pairs Well With

A Saturday morning with nowhere to be, terrible local news playing in the background, and a mug of gas station coffee that somehow tastes perfect.

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### Did You Know?

> The Midwest's love affair with cinnamon rolls runs deep — so deep that in many parts of Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, cinnamon rolls are served \*as a side dish with chili.\* Not dessert. A side. The combination sounds unhinged until you try it: the sweetness of the roll cuts the heat and tomato acidity of the chili, and the soft bread soaks up the broth. School cafeterias across the region have been serving this combo since at least the 1960s, and attempts to remove it from school lunch menus have met with the kind of fierce resistance usually reserved for property tax increases. The tradition likely stems from Swedish and Scandinavian immigrants who brought \*kanelbullar\* (cinnamon buns) to the northern plains, where they merged with church-supper culture and midcentury convenience cooking to become the ultimate Midwest comfort carb.

\* Photography note: A 9×13 pan of cinnamon rolls, frosting still melting and dripping down the sides. One roll pulled away, stretching the gooey filling between it and the pan. Morning light through a kitchen window. A butter knife with frosting on it. Warm, golden, inviting — the photo should make you smell cinnamon.\*



# Dinner Rolls

*Midwest US*

*Soft, fluffy, and utterly irresistible, these homemade dinner rolls are a warm and welcoming addition to any Midwestern meal, a true symbol of comfort and hospitality.*

## Ingredients

- 1 cup (240ml) warm milk (105-115°F / 40-46°C)
- 2 ¼ tsp active dry yeast (1 standard packet)
- 2 tbsp (25g) granulated sugar
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup (56g) unsalted butter, melted and cooled, plus more for brushing
- 1 tsp salt
- 3 to 3 ½ cups (360-420g) all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting

## Instructions

- 1 Activate Yeast:** In a large bowl, combine the warm milk and granulated sugar. Sprinkle the active dry yeast over the top and let sit for 5-10 minutes, or until foamy.
- 2 Combine Wet Ingredients:** Stir in the lightly beaten egg, melted butter, and salt into the yeast mixture.
- 3 Add Flour:** Gradually add 3 cups of flour, mixing with a wooden spoon or dough hook until a shaggy dough forms. If the dough is too sticky, add more flour, a tablespoon at a time, until it pulls away from the sides of the bowl.
- 4 Knead Dough:** Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead for 5-7 minutes until it's smooth and elastic. Alternatively, knead with a stand mixer for 3-5 minutes.
- 5 First Rise:** Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl, turning once to coat. Cover with plastic wrap or a clean kitchen towel and let rise in a warm place for 1 to 1.5 hours, or until doubled in size.
- 6 Shape Rolls:** Gently punch down the dough and turn it out onto a lightly floured surface. Divide the dough into 12-16 equal pieces. Roll each piece into a smooth ball.
- 7 Second Rise:** Arrange the shaped rolls in a lightly greased 9x13 inch (23x33 cm) baking dish, leaving a small space between them. Cover again and let rise for another 30-45 minutes, or until puffy.
- 8 Preheat Oven:** While the rolls are on their second rise, preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C).
- 9 Bake:** Bake for 15-20 minutes, or until the tops are golden brown.
- 10 Butter & Serve:** Immediately after removing from the oven, brush the tops of the hot rolls with a little melted butter. Serve warm.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	12-16 rolls
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	15-20 minutes
Total Time	2 hours 45 minutes to 3 hours 15 minutes (including rises)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Breads

## Tips & Variations

- For an extra rich flavor, substitute some of the milk with heavy cream.
- Add a tablespoon of fresh chopped herbs like rosemary or thyme to the dough for savory rolls.
- Make ahead: After the second rise, cover the rolls tightly and refrigerate overnight. Let them come to room temperature for 30-45 minutes before baking, adding a few extra minutes to the bake time.
- For softer crusts, place the baking dish of rolls on a lower rack in the oven and place a pan of hot water on the rack below it while baking.

## Did You Know?

> Homemade dinner rolls are a testament to the enduring tradition of home baking in the Midwest. Often seen as a foundational element of any holiday feast, Sunday dinner, or potluck, these soft, yeasty rolls symbolize warmth, nourishment, and communal gathering. The act of making and sharing fresh bread is deeply ingrained in the region's culinary culture, reflecting a love for simple, comforting foods that bring people together.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A basket overflowing with warm, golden-brown dinner rolls, some with visible soft steam. A small crock of softened butter and a simple linen napkin nearby. The basket is on a weathered wooden table, bathed in soft, inviting natural light, highlighting the tender texture of the rolls.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a full basket to your potluck, already sliced and ready to serve, and probably insist you take some home for breakfast.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A festive holiday meal, a comforting Sunday dinner with the family, and the satisfying feeling of a well-loved kitchen.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Dinner Rolls**

> "Grandma Lucille always brushed her hot rolls with a little melted butter \*and\* a sprinkle of garlic powder right after they came out of the oven. 'It's my little secret for that extra special flavor,' she'd wink, 'makes everyone reach for a second one!'"



# Lefse

*Minnesota & the Dakotas — Scandinavian Heritage Country*

*Paper-thin rounds of tender potato flatbread, rolled out on a cloth-covered board with a grooved rolling pin by someone who learned from someone who learned from someone who came over on a boat from Norway. Spread with butter and sugar, rolled up, and eaten with the quiet reverence of a people who don't believe in showing off — but absolutely will if you get the lefse wrong.*

## Ingredients

- 5 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2½ to 3 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for rolling
- For Serving
- Softened butter
- Granulated sugar or brown sugar
- Some families add cinnamon. Other families consider this heresy. You decide.

## Instructions

- 1 **Cook the potatoes.** Boil the potatoes in salted water until very tender, about 20 minutes. Drain thoroughly — and this is critical — let them dry in the pot over low heat for a minute or two, shaking occasionally. Excess moisture is the enemy of lefse.
- 2 **Rice the potatoes.** Pass the hot potatoes through a potato ricer or food mill. Do not mash them with a masher or — heaven forbid — a food processor. You need perfectly smooth, lump-free potatoes, and a ricer is the only way.
- 3 **Add the richness.** While the potatoes are still hot, stir in the butter, heavy cream, sugar, and salt until everything is melted and incorporated. Spread the mixture on a sheet pan and let it cool, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight. Cold potatoes are essential — warm potatoes will make sticky, unworkable dough and you will want to throw things.
- 4 **Make the dough.** Add 2½ cups of flour to the cold potato mixture and mix gently until a soft dough forms. Add more flour a tablespoon at a time only if needed. The dough should be soft and pliable but not sticky. Less flour = more tender lefse. Resist the urge to add too much.
- 5 **Divide.** Portion the dough into golf ball-sized rounds (about 2 tablespoons each). Keep them covered so they don't dry out.
- 6 **Roll.** On a well-floured surface (many use a cloth-covered board and a cloth-covered grooved rolling pin — the traditional tools), roll each ball into a paper-thin round, about 10–12 inches in diameter. Rotate frequently and add flour as needed to prevent sticking. The thinner, the better. You should almost be able to see through it.
- 7 **Cook.** Heat an ungreased griddle or large flat skillet to about 400°F (if your griddle has a thermometer) or medium-high heat. Carefully transfer the lefse round to the griddle — a lefse turning stick (a long, flat wooden stick) is traditional and genuinely helpful. Cook for about 60–90 seconds per side, until brown spots appear. The lefse should bubble slightly and look dry on the surface before flipping.
- 8 **Stack and cover.** As each round is cooked, stack them between clean kitchen towels. This keeps them soft and pliable. Cover the whole stack with a towel.
- 9 **Serve.** Spread each round with soft butter, sprinkle with sugar, roll up or fold into quarters, and eat while making meaningful eye contact with your Scandinavian ancestors.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	16–20 rounds
Prep Time	30 minutes (plus chilling)
Chill Time	2–4 hours or overnight
Cook Time	2–3 minutes per round
Total Time	About 4 hours (mostly passive)
Difficulty	Hard (requires practice and possibly therapy)
Category	Breads / Flatbreads

### Midwest Nice Rating:

If you bring homemade lefse to a potluck in Minnesota, someone *\*will\** cry. This is not a joke.

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## Tips & Variations

- Tools Matter: A lefse griddle (flat, round, unrimmed), a grooved rolling pin, a pastry cloth, and a turning stick aren't strictly required, but they make the job dramatically easier. They're sold as "lefse kits" at every kitchen store in Minnesota. Nowhere else, but every store in Minnesota.
- Potato Variety: Russets are essential — their starchiness and low moisture content are what make lefse work. Waxy potatoes (Yukon Gold, red potatoes) will produce gluey dough.
- Instant Potatoes? Some families use instant potato flakes. Other families consider this grounds for disinheritance. This recipe takes no position, but it was written with real potatoes.
- Freezing: Lefse freezes beautifully. Stack rounds between sheets of wax paper, wrap tightly in plastic, and freeze for up to 3 months. Thaw at room temperature.
- Sweet vs. Savory: Butter and sugar is the classic. But lefse also works as a wrap for lutefisk (if you dare), turkey, or even peanut butter and jelly.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"Rice the potatoes twice. Once isn't enough — you need them smoother than smooth. And the dough should rest in the fridge overnight, not just two hours. The patience is what separates good lefse from great lefse. Also, I can tell when you used instant potatoes. I can always tell."*

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## Pairs Well With

A church basement in December, the lingering scent of lutefisk you're pretending not to notice, your Norwegian grandmother's silent judgment of your rolling technique, and approximately fourteen cousins arguing about whose lefse is better.

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## Did You Know?

> Lefse came to the Upper Midwest with the massive wave of Norwegian immigration in the late 19th century. In Norway, it was peasant food — a simple potato flatbread born from a cold climate where wheat was scarce and potatoes were plentiful. In Minnesota and the Dakotas, it became something closer to sacred. Lefse-making is a communal, generational activity: church groups hold lefse-making days in the fall, families gather around kitchen tables at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and the techniques are passed down with a reverence usually reserved for religious texts. The town of Starbuck, Minnesota, holds the record for the world's largest lefse — nine feet, eight inches in diameter, made in 1983. There are lefse competitions, lefse festivals, and at least one lefse-themed coloring book. For Minnesotans of Scandinavian descent, lefse isn't just food. It's identity, it's memory, it's the taste of home — and if you're not Scandinavian, it's still one of the most delicious flatbreads you'll ever eat.

\* Photography note: A stack of thin, lightly browned lefse rounds on a flour-dusted wooden board, one rolled up with butter glistening inside. A grooved rolling pin and turning stick nearby. Flour everywhere — on the board, on the cloth, maybe on someone's apron. Warm kitchen light. The photo should feel like a family kitchen in December.\*



## Skillet Cornbread

*Missouri, Kansas, Iowa — Where the Corn Belt Meets the Cast Iron*

*Golden, craggy, and crusty on the bottom from a screaming-hot cast iron skillet, with a tender crumb that's just barely sweet enough to remind you it's not a brick. This is cornbread the way it's supposed to be made — in a pan your great-grandmother seasoned with fifty years of bacon grease.*

## Ingredients

- 1¼ cups yellow cornmeal (stone-ground if you can get it)
- ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar (see note below — this is where wars start)
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup buttermilk
- ½ cup whole milk
- 2 large eggs
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, plus 2 tablespoons for the skillet

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat and prep.** Place your 10-inch cast iron skillet in the oven and preheat to 425°F. The skillet needs to be ripping hot — this is what creates the legendary crust.
- 2 **Mix the dry.** In a large bowl, whisk together the cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
- 3 **Mix the wet.** In a separate bowl, whisk together the buttermilk, whole milk, eggs, and 4 tablespoons of melted butter.
- 4 **Combine.** Pour the wet ingredients into the dry and stir until just combined. A few lumps are fine. Do not overmix — overmixed cornbread is tough cornbread, and tough cornbread is a crime.
- 5 **Hot skillet magic.** Carefully remove the screaming-hot skillet from the oven. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter and swirl to coat the bottom and sides. The butter should sizzle and foam immediately. Pour the batter into the skillet — it should hiss and spit. This is the sound of a perfect crust forming.
- 6 **Bake.** Return the skillet to the oven and bake for 20–25 minutes, until the top is golden and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. The edges should be deeply golden and slightly pulled away from the sides.
- 7 **Serve.** Let it cool in the skillet for 5 minutes. Cut into wedges and serve warm with butter, honey, or just your hands if nobody's looking.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8 wedges
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	20–25 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Breads / Sides

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Essential alongside chili, soup, or any potluck that has a crockpot going. Loses one hotdish only because it's a supporting player, not the star.

## Tips & Variations

- **The Sugar Debate:** Two tablespoons of sugar puts this squarely in the Midwest camp — a little sweet, not cake-level. Southerners would say that's already too much. Northerners might want more. Adjust to your conscience. This cookbook takes no official position and hopes for peace.
- **Bacon Drippings:** Replace the butter in the skillet with 2 tablespoons of saved bacon grease. This is not optional if you have bacon grease available. It is the law.
- **Jalapeño Cheddar:** Fold in 1 cup shredded sharp cheddar and 2 diced jalapeños for a version that goes with chili like thunder goes with lightning.

- Honey Butter: Whip together ½ cup softened butter with 3 tablespoons honey and a pinch of salt. Serve alongside. Life-changing.
  - Corn Kernel Cornbread: Add ¾ cup fresh or frozen corn kernels to the batter for a pop of sweetness and texture.
  - No Cast Iron? A 9-inch round cake pan works in a pinch, but you won't get the same crust. Consider this your excuse to finally invest in a cast iron skillet.
  - > Grandma's Secret: \*Preheat the skillet with the butter in it for at least 10 minutes — most people don't get it hot enough. And use stone-ground cornmeal, not that fine Jiffy stuff. You want grit. Cornbread should have texture.\*
- 

### **Pairs Well With**

A bowl of chili that's been simmering since noon, the sound of a screen door slamming, and the eternal argument about whether cornbread should be sweet or savory (it should be both, and this hill is worth dying on).

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### **Did You Know?**

> Cornbread is one of the oldest American foods, predating European colonization — Native Americans were making corn-based breads for thousands of years before anyone thought to argue about sugar in the batter. The Midwest's relationship with cornbread is practical: corn grows everywhere here, and when you're surrounded by it, you eat it in every form imaginable. The cast iron skillet method likely came north with Southern and Appalachian migrants who moved to Midwestern industrial cities during the Great Migration. Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago all developed their own cornbread traditions, blending Southern technique with Midwestern ingredients (more butter, a touch of sugar, slightly lighter crumb). The result is a cornbread that's a peacemaker — sweet enough for the North, crusty enough for the South, and good enough to shut everybody up.

\* Photography note: A cast iron skillet of golden cornbread, one wedge already cut and pulled slightly away, steam rising from the crumb. A pat of butter melting on top. Red-checked cloth underneath. Maybe a bowl of chili in soft focus behind it. Warm, rustic, simple — the photo should feel like a Sunday afternoon.\*

# Desserts



# Bread Pudding with Bourbon Sauce

*Missouri, US*

*A decadent and comforting dessert, Bread Pudding with Bourbon Sauce transforms stale bread into a rich, custardy treat, elevated by a sweet, boozy sauce—a beloved staple, especially in regions with a taste for Southern-influenced comforts like Missouri.*

## Ingredients

- For the Bread Pudding:
  - 6 cups (about 1 lb / 450g) stale day-old bread, cut into 1-inch cubes (brioche, challah, or French bread recommended)
  - 4 large eggs
  - 2 cups (480ml) whole milk
  - 1 cup (240ml) heavy cream
  - 1 cup (200g) granulated sugar
  - 1 tbsp vanilla extract
  - 1 tsp ground cinnamon
  - ½ tsp ground nutmeg
  - ¼ tsp salt
- Optional: ½ cup raisins or dried cranberries
- For the Bourbon Sauce:
  - ½ cup (113g) unsalted butter
  - ½ cup (100g) granulated sugar
  - ¼ cup (60ml) bourbon
  - 2 tbsp (30ml) heavy cream
  - 1 tsp vanilla extract

## Instructions

- 1 Prepare Baking Dish:** Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Lightly grease a 9x13 inch (23x33 cm) baking dish.
- 2 Arrange Bread:** Scatter the bread cubes evenly in the prepared baking dish. If using, sprinkle the raisins or dried cranberries over the bread.
- 3 Make Custard:** In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, heavy cream, granulated sugar, vanilla extract, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt until well combined.
- 4 Pour Custard Over Bread:** Pour the custard mixture evenly over the bread cubes, making sure all the bread is moistened. Gently press down on the bread with a spoon to ensure it soaks up the custard. Let sit for 10-15 minutes.
- 5 Bake:** Bake for 45-55 minutes, or until the pudding is set, golden brown on top, and a knife inserted into the center comes out mostly clean.
- 6 Make Bourbon Sauce:** While the pudding bakes, prepare the sauce. In a small saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Stir in the granulated sugar and cook, stirring constantly, until the sugar is dissolved and the mixture is smooth.
- 7 Add Bourbon & Cream:** Carefully remove from heat and slowly whisk in the bourbon, heavy cream, and vanilla extract. Return to low heat and simmer gently for 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until slightly thickened. Be careful not to boil.
- 8 Serve:** Let the bread pudding cool for a few minutes before serving. Cut into squares and generously drizzle with the warm bourbon sauce. Serve immediately.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	45-55 minutes
Total Time	1 hour 5 minutes - 1 hour 15 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- For a richer flavor, toast the bread cubes slightly before adding them to the baking dish.
- Experiment with different types of bread, such as challah or brioche, for a more luxurious texture.
- Add a tablespoon of orange zest to the custard for a bright, citrusy note.
- For a non-alcoholic sauce, replace the bourbon with apple juice or a strong brewed coffee.

## Did You Know?

> Bread pudding, with its origins in frugality and resourcefulness, became a beloved dessert across many parts of America, including the Midwest, especially in states like Missouri that share culinary ties with Southern traditions. It's a testament to transforming simple, everyday ingredients (like stale bread)

into something extraordinary. The addition of a bourbon sauce elevates this humble dessert into a sophisticated, comforting treat, often a highlight at family gatherings and holiday meals.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A warm, golden-brown square of bread pudding, glistening with a generous drizzle of rich bourbon sauce. It's served on a simple white dessert plate with a small scoop of vanilla bean ice cream melting alongside. The plate sits on a distressed wooden table, bathed in soft, warm overhead lighting, emphasizing the comforting texture.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

4/5 (Will bring a full pan to your potluck, and quietly make sure there's enough for everyone, even if they claim they're "too full for dessert.")

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A cozy holiday dinner, a special occasion with loved ones, and the comforting feeling of indulging in a truly satisfying sweet treat.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Bread Pudding With Bourbon Sauce**

> "Grandma Lucille always soaked her raisins (or cranberries!) in a little extra bourbon for about 30 minutes before adding them to the pudding. 'It plumps them up just right,' she'd declare with a wink, 'and adds a little extra zing that makes this pudding truly special!'"



## Buckeye Candies

Ohio

*Creamy peanut butter balls partially dipped in dark chocolate to resemble the nut of the Ohio buckeye tree — these no-bake confections are Ohio's sweetest obsession, a fixture at every holiday party, game day spread, and care package sent from home.*

## Ingredients

- Peanut Butter Centers
- 1½ cups creamy peanut butter (such as Jif or Skippy — not natural)
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened to room temperature
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- 3 cups powdered sugar, sifted
- Chocolate Coating
- 2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 2 tablespoons vegetable shortening or coconut oil

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the peanut butter filling.** In a large bowl, beat the peanut butter, butter, vanilla, and salt with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth and creamy, about 2 minutes. Gradually add the powdered sugar, ½ cup at a time, mixing on low until fully incorporated. The dough should be thick, smooth, and hold its shape when rolled.
- 2 **Roll the balls.** Using a tablespoon or small cookie scoop, portion the dough and roll into 1-inch balls between your palms. Place on a parchment-lined baking sheet. You should get about 48 balls.
- 3 **Chill.** Place the baking sheet in the freezer for at least 1 hour, or the refrigerator for 2 hours, until the balls are firm. This is essential — soft balls will fall apart during dipping.
- 4 **Melt the chocolate.** In a microwave-safe bowl, combine the chocolate chips and shortening. Microwave in 30-second intervals, stirring between each, until completely smooth (usually 3–4 rounds). Alternatively, melt in a double boiler over barely simmering water, stirring constantly.
- 5 **Dip the buckeyes.** Remove a few balls from the freezer at a time (keep the rest cold). Insert a toothpick into the top of a ball. Dip it into the melted chocolate about ¾ of the way, leaving a circle of peanut butter visible at the top — this is what makes it look like a buckeye nut. Let the excess chocolate drip off for a moment.
- 6 **Set the buckeyes.** Place each dipped candy back on the parchment-lined sheet. Once the chocolate starts to set, gently twist out the toothpick and smooth the hole with your fingertip or the back of a spoon.
- 7 **Chill to set.** Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes until the chocolate is completely firm and set.
- 8 **Store and serve.** Keep buckeyes in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 weeks, or freeze for up to 3 months. Serve slightly chilled.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	About 48 candies
Prep Time	30 minutes
Chill Time	1 hour + 30 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes (melting chocolate)
Total Time	2 hours 10 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts / Confections

## Tips & Variations

- Peanut Butter Choice Matters: Use standard commercial creamy peanut butter (Jif, Skippy, etc.). Natural peanut butter has too much oil and won't hold its shape.
- The "Buckeye" Look: The exposed peanut butter circle at the top is what makes these look like actual buckeye nuts. Don't fully dip them — that would make them truffles, not buckeyes. Ohioans will notice.
- Pretzel Buckeyes: Press each peanut butter ball onto a mini pretzel before dipping for a salty-sweet-crunchy variation.

- White Chocolate Drizzle: After the dark chocolate sets, drizzle with white chocolate for a fancy holiday presentation.
- Almond Butter Version: Substitute almond butter for a twist, though purists may object.
- Perfect Tempering: If your chocolate looks dull after setting, add a little more shortening to the melting chocolate next time, or temper it properly by seeding with chopped chocolate.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Ohio is "The Buckeye State," named for the prevalence of buckeye trees (\*Aesculus glabra\*) with their distinctive nuts — dark brown with a lighter tan circle on top. Real buckeye nuts are actually toxic to humans, but these candy versions are anything but. Buckeye candies are practically a state religion in Ohio, especially during football season. At Ohio State University tailgates, you'll find them on every table, passed around every living room during Buckeye games, and shipped by the tin to homesick Ohioans everywhere. The rivalry between Ohio State and Michigan even extends to these candies — Wolverine fans have been known to fully dip them in chocolate ("killing the buckeye"), a culinary act of war that no Ohioan takes lightly.

\* Photography note: A dozen buckeyes arranged on a small white pedestal plate, the peanut butter tops facing up like little eyes. One bitten in half to show the creamy interior. A few scattered on dark wax paper alongside. Deep autumnal background — maybe a wooden table with fall leaves. Warm, holiday-party lighting.\*



## Classic Apple Pie (with Optional Cheddar Crust)

*Across the Midwest*

*The definitive American dessert, perfected in the Midwest where the apples actually grow. A flaky, all-butter crust filled with cinnamon-spiced apples, baked until golden and bubbling. And for the bold: a sharp cheddar cheese crust that sounds wrong until you try it and realize it's the best thing that ever happened to a pie.*

## Ingredients

- Pie Crust (makes 2 — top and bottom)
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 cup (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cubed
- ¼–½ cup ice water
- For cheddar crust: add ¾ cup finely shredded sharp cheddar to the flour mixture
- Filling
- 3 lbs mixed apples (Honeycrisp, Granny Smith, and Braeburn — mix tart and sweet)
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1½ teaspoons cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon allspice
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons cold butter, cut into small pieces
- Egg Wash
- 1 egg beaten with 1 tablespoon water
- Coarse sugar for sprinkling

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the crust:** Whisk flour, salt, and sugar (and cheddar if using). Cut in cold butter using a pastry cutter or your fingers until mixture resembles coarse crumbs with some pea-sized butter pieces remaining. Add ice water 1 tablespoon at a time, mixing until dough just holds together. Divide in half, flatten into discs, wrap in plastic, refrigerate 1 hour.
- 2 **Prepare filling:** Peel, core, and slice apples ¼-inch thick. Toss with sugar, flour, cornstarch, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, lemon juice, and vanilla. Let sit 15 minutes.
- 3 **Assemble:** Roll one dough disc into a 12-inch circle. Fit into a 9-inch pie plate. Pour in apple filling, mounding slightly in the center. Dot with butter pieces.
- 4 **Top crust:** Roll second disc into a 12-inch circle. Place over filling. Trim, fold edges under, and crimp decoratively. Cut 4–5 slits for steam vents.
- 5 **Egg wash:** Brush top crust with egg wash. Sprinkle with coarse sugar.
- 6 **Bake:** Place pie on a baking sheet (to catch drips). Bake at 425°F for 15 minutes, then reduce to 375°F and bake 35–45 minutes more until crust is deep golden and juices are bubbling through the vents.
- 7 **Cool** at least 2 hours before slicing. (The filling needs time to set.)

## At A Glance

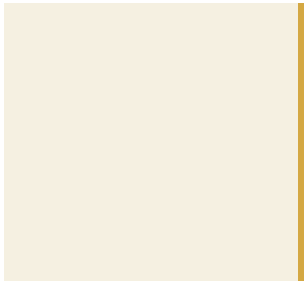
Servings	8
Prep Time	40 minutes + 1 hour chill
Cook Time	50–60 minutes
Total Time	2 hours 30 minutes - 2 hours 40 minutes (including chilling)
Difficulty	Intermediate
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- The apple mix matters: All Granny Smith = too tart. All Honeycrisp = too sweet and mushy. Mix 2–3 varieties for the best texture and flavor.
- Cheddar crust: Sharp cheddar in the pie dough creates a savory-sweet contrast that's traditional in the upper Midwest and parts of New England. "Apple pie without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze," goes the saying.
- Lattice top: For a showstopper, weave a lattice crust. More work, but stunning.
- Overnight rest: Apple pie is actually better the day after baking. The flavors meld and the filling fully sets.
- À la mode: Vanilla ice cream or a slice of sharp cheddar on top. Never both. You have to pick a side.

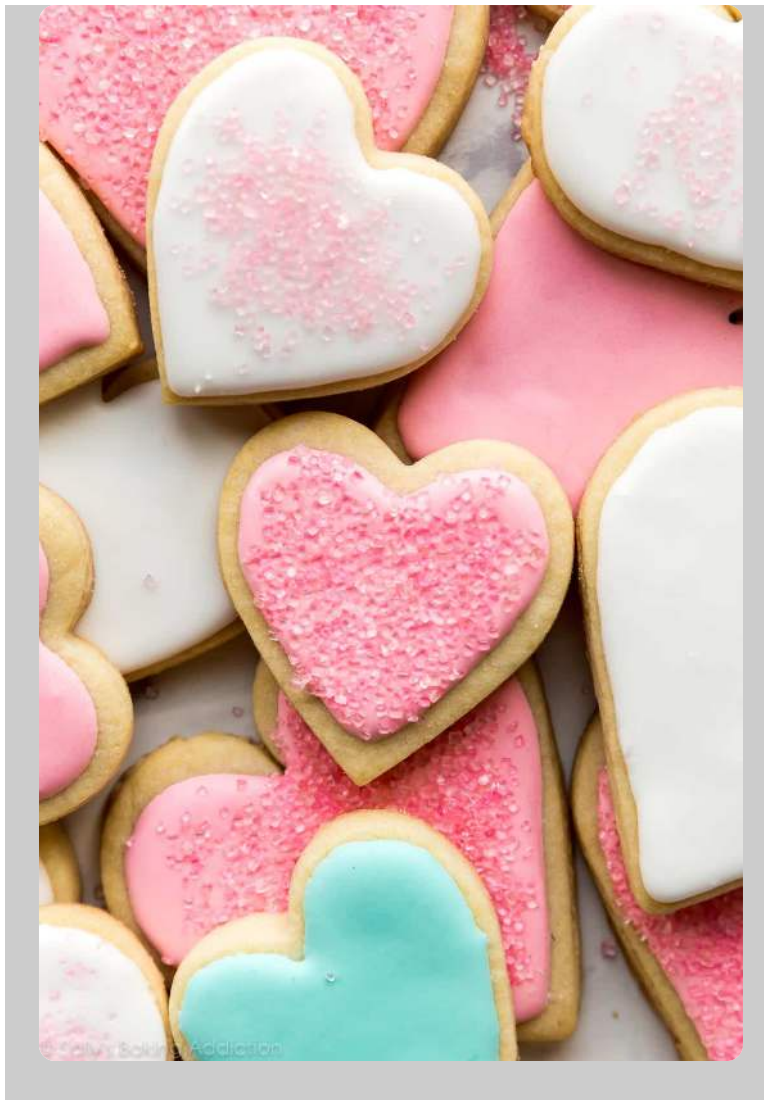
## Did You Know?

Michigan is the third-largest apple-producing state in the US, and the Midwest's apple orchards — stretching from Michigan through Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois — produce dozens of heritage varieties perfect for pie. The tradition of serving apple pie with cheddar cheese dates back to at least the 1800s and was so embedded in the culture that in 1999, a Vermont state legislator proposed a



bill requiring apple pie to be served with "a good grade of Vermont cheddar cheese, a slice of sharp cheddar cheese, or vanilla ice cream." The bill passed. Apple pie with cheese isn't weird — it's legislated.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style — golden pie on a wooden cutting board, one slice cut and slightly pulled out, on a weathered farm table. Linen napkin, vintage pie server. Basket of whole apples in the background. Warm afternoon window light.\*



## Frosted Sugar Cookies

*Across the Midwest — Every Kitchen with a Cookie Sheet and a Dream*

*Thick, soft, pillowy sugar cookies with slightly crisp edges, topped with a smooth layer of sweet buttercream frosting in whatever color matches the nearest holiday. These aren't crispy sugar cookies. These aren't thin. These are the impossibly soft, cakey, frosted sugar cookies from the bakery at your small-town grocery store — the ones in the clear plastic clamshell that you pretend you're buying for the kids.*

## Ingredients

- The Cookies
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon almond extract (the secret weapon)
- ½ cup sour cream
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- The Frosting
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 4 cups powdered sugar, sifted
- 3–4 tablespoons heavy cream or whole milk
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- Food coloring (optional — pink, blue, green, whatever the season demands)
- Sprinkles (always)

## Instructions

- 1 **Cream the butter and sugar.** In a large bowl or stand mixer, beat the softened butter and sugar together on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Scrape down the sides.
- 2 **Add the eggs and extracts.** Beat in the eggs one at a time, then add the vanilla and almond extracts. Mix in the sour cream until combined.
- 3 **Add the dry ingredients.** In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients in three additions, mixing on low speed until just combined after each. The dough will be soft and slightly sticky.
- 4 **Chill.** Cover the dough and refrigerate for at least 1 hour (or up to overnight). Cold dough spreads less, which means thicker, puffier cookies.
- 5 **Shape.** Preheat your oven to 350°F. Line baking sheets with parchment paper. Scoop the dough into 2-tablespoon balls (a cookie scoop is your friend) and place 2 inches apart on the baking sheets. Flatten each ball slightly with the bottom of a glass or your palm — you want them about ¾ inch thick.
- 6 **Bake.** Bake for 10–12 minutes, until the edges are barely set and the tops still look slightly underdone. They will NOT look done. Remove them anyway. They'll continue cooking on the hot pan. Overbaked sugar cookies are dry sugar cookies, and dry sugar cookies are a tragedy.
- 7 **Cool completely.** Let the cookies cool on the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely before frosting. This is the hardest step. Be patient.
- 8 **Make the frosting.** Beat the softened butter until smooth. Gradually add the powdered sugar, alternating with the cream, beating on medium speed until light, fluffy, and spreadable. Add vanilla and salt. Tint with food coloring if desired.
- 9 **Frost and decorate.** Spread a thick layer of frosting on each cookie with a butter knife or offset spatula. Add sprinkles immediately before the frosting sets. Admire your work. Eat one as quality control.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	24 cookies
Prep Time	20 minutes
Chill Time	1 hour
Bake Time	10–12 minutes per batch
Total Time	About 2½ hours
Difficulty	Easy to Moderate
Category	Desserts / Cookies

## Midwest Nice Rating:

The official currency of the Midwest. Accepted at birthday parties, holidays, teacher appreciation days, new neighbor welcomes, bad days, good days, and every day in between.

## Tips & Variations

- The Sour Cream: This is what makes the cookies impossibly soft and tender. The acidity reacts with the baking soda, creating a lighter, cakier texture. Don't substitute yogurt — the fat content of sour cream matters.
  - Almond Extract: Just ½ teaspoon transforms these from "good sugar cookies" to "what's your recipe" sugar cookies. The almond flavor is subtle — most people can't identify it, but they taste the difference.
  - Roll-Out Cookies: This dough can also be rolled out and cut with cookie cutters for holidays. Roll to ¼ inch thick for cutouts. Chill the rolled dough again before cutting for cleaner shapes.
  - Don't Overbake: This is the single most important tip. Pull them when they look underdone. The residual heat will finish the job. A perfectly baked sugar cookie should be slightly pale on top with just a hint of golden on the edges.
  - Frosting Consistency: Add cream a tablespoon at a time. You want the frosting thick enough to hold its shape when spread, but smooth enough to spread easily. If it's too stiff, add more cream. Too thin, add more powdered sugar.
  - Holiday Rotation: Pink frosting with heart sprinkles (Valentine's Day). Pastel with egg-shaped sprinkles (Easter). Red, white, and blue (4th of July). Orange and black (Halloween). Red and green (Christmas). This cookie does the work of six different recipes.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"A tablespoon of cornstarch in the flour — it keeps the cookies pillowy soft even the next day. And refrigerate the frosted cookies for 10 minutes before stacking them for transport. The frosting will set and they won't stick together in the container."*\*

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### Pairs Well With

A kindergarten Valentine's Day party, a Christmas cookie exchange where yours are the first to disappear, a cup of coffee while standing in the kitchen pretending you're not about to eat a fourth cookie, and the realization that the grocery store version was always just trying to be this.

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### Did You Know?

- > The soft, thick, frosted sugar cookie — distinct from the thin, crispy European-style sugar cookie — is an American invention that reached its peak form in the Midwest. The style traces back to the Pennsylvania Dutch "Nazareth sugar cookie" of the 18th century, but the modern soft-and-frosted version evolved in Midwestern kitchens during the 20th century, when ingredients like sour cream and baking powder became widely available and home bakers prioritized tenderness over crispness. The grocery store version (you know the ones — in the plastic clamshell container, neon pink frosting, served at every school party) became iconic in the 1990s, produced by regional bakeries like Lofthouse. Midwesterners have a complicated relationship with Lofthouse cookies: they're objectively mediocre, but they trigger such powerful nostalgia that criticizing them feels like criticizing a family member. This recipe is better than Lofthouse. You're welcome to tell people that, but be prepared for the debate.
- \* Photography note: A spread of thick, frosted sugar cookies on a cooling rack — some pink, some blue, some yellow, all with sprinkles. One cookie with a bite taken out, showing the soft, cakey interior. A bowl of sprinkles nearby. Bright, cheerful, slightly overhead angle. The photo should feel like a holiday kitchen — colorful, fun, inviting.\*



# German Chocolate Cake

*Midwest — Church Suppers & Birthday Tables*

*Three layers of tender chocolate cake slathered in a decadent coconut-pecan frosting that's cooked on the stovetop until thick and caramelized — this isn't actually German at all, but it's been the Midwest's most requested birthday cake for over sixty years.*

## Ingredients

- The Cake
- 4 ounces sweet baking chocolate (such as Baker's German's Sweet Chocolate), chopped
- ½ cup boiling water
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs, separated
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 cup buttermilk
- Coconut-Pecan Frosting
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 3 large egg yolks, lightly beaten
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into pieces
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1½ cups sweetened flaked coconut
- 1 cup chopped pecans, toasted

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the Cake**
- 2 **Prep.** Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease and flour three 9-inch round cake pans. Line the bottoms with parchment paper.
- 3 **Melt the chocolate.** Place the chopped chocolate in a small bowl. Pour the boiling water over it and stir until completely melted and smooth. Set aside to cool slightly.
- 4 **Mix dry ingredients.** In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, and salt.
- 5 **Cream butter and sugar.** In a large bowl, beat the butter and sugar with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add the egg yolks one at a time, beating well after each. Mix in the vanilla and the melted chocolate mixture.
- 6 **Alternate additions.** With the mixer on low, add the flour mixture in three additions, alternating with the buttermilk in two additions, beginning and ending with flour. Mix just until combined.
- 7 **Whip the egg whites.** In a clean bowl with clean beaters, beat the egg whites until stiff peaks form. Gently fold the whites into the batter in two additions — this is what makes the cake tender.
- 8 **Bake.** Divide the batter evenly among the three prepared pans. Bake for 25–30 minutes, until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool in pans for 10 minutes, then turn out onto wire racks and cool completely.
- 9 **Make the Frosting**
- 10 **Cook the frosting.** In a medium saucepan, combine the evaporated milk, sugar, beaten egg yolks, and butter. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens and turns golden amber, about 12–15 minutes. It should be thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.
- 11 **Add coconut and pecans.** Remove from heat. Stir in the vanilla, coconut, and toasted pecans. Let the frosting cool to room temperature, stirring occasionally, until it's thick and spreadable (about 45 minutes).
- 12 **Assemble**
- 13 **Frost the cake.** Place one cake layer on a serving plate. Spread with about ⅓ of the frosting. Repeat with the second layer and more frosting. Top with the final layer and the remaining frosting. Leave the sides unfrosted (traditional) or frost the sides with chocolate buttercream for a more finished look.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	12–16
Prep Time	30 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes (cake) + 15 minutes (frosting)
Total Time	2 hours (including cooling)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- The Chocolate Matters: Baker's German's Sweet Chocolate is the traditional choice and gives the cake its distinctive flavor. Don't substitute unsweetened chocolate — the cake will be too bitter.

- Frosting Patience: The stovetop frosting needs constant stirring and patience. Don't rush it — undercooked frosting will be too runny. It should be the color of caramel when done.
- Toast the Pecans: Always toast the pecans (350°F for 8 minutes) before adding to the frosting. It deepens their flavor dramatically.
- Sheet Cake Version: Pour the batter into a greased 9x13 pan, bake for 35–40 minutes, and spread the frosting on top. Easier for potlucks.
- Make Ahead: The unfrosted layers can be wrapped tightly and frozen for up to a month. Thaw, then frost.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Despite its name, German Chocolate Cake has nothing to do with Germany. It's named after Sam German, an American chocolatier who developed a mild, sweet baking chocolate for the Baker's Chocolate Company in 1852. The cake recipe was created more than a century later, in 1957, when a Dallas homemaker submitted her recipe using "German's chocolate" to a local newspaper. The recipe went viral (1950s-style), was picked up by General Foods (which owned Baker's Chocolate), and became a national sensation. Somewhere along the way, the possessive apostrophe was dropped, and everyone assumed the cake was German. It isn't. It's as American as the Midwest church supper where it became a perennial star.

\* Photography note: A three-layer cake on a white pedestal stand, the rich coconut-pecan frosting cascading between and over the layers. A slice removed and plated, showing the three dark chocolate layers. Pecans and coconut visible in the frosting. Warm, celebratory lighting. Clean, elegant, but homey.\*



## Iowa State Fair Funnel Cake

*Iowa — The State Fair*

*Ribbons of golden batter swirled into hot oil, fried until impossibly crispy, and buried under a blizzard of powdered sugar — funnel cake is the edible symbol of every Midwestern state fair, the one indulgence that makes standing in line completely worth it.*

## Ingredients

- The Batter
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 large eggs
- 1½ cups whole milk
- ½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Vegetable or canola oil for frying (about 2 inches in a deep skillet)
- For Topping
- Powdered sugar (generous — this is not optional)
- Whipped cream (optional)
- Strawberry or chocolate sauce (optional)
- Fresh berries (optional)

## Instructions

- 1 Make the batter.** In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and cinnamon. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs, milk, and vanilla. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry and whisk until smooth — the batter should be pourable but not thin (similar to pancake batter).
- 2 Heat the oil.** Pour oil to a depth of about 2 inches in a large, deep skillet or Dutch oven. Heat to 375°F. Use a thermometer — temperature control is crucial for crispy funnel cake.
- 3 Pour the batter.** Transfer batter to a funnel, squeeze bottle, or large zip-top bag with a corner snipped (about ½-inch opening). Holding the funnel over the oil, pour the batter in a steady stream, moving in circles and crisscrossing patterns to create a lacy, interconnected web about 6–7 inches across.
- 4 Fry.** Cook for 1–2 minutes per side until golden brown. Use tongs or a spider strainer to carefully flip once. The funnel cake should be deeply golden and crispy.
- 5 Drain.** Remove from the oil and drain on a wire rack set over a sheet pan (or paper towels in a pinch).
- 6 Sugar it immediately.** While still hot, dust liberally — no, obscenely — with powdered sugar. The heat should melt the first layer, so add more.
- 7 Serve immediately.** Funnel cake is best eaten within minutes of frying, standing up, with powdered sugar on your shirt. Add whipped cream, chocolate sauce, or fresh berries if desired.

## At A Glance

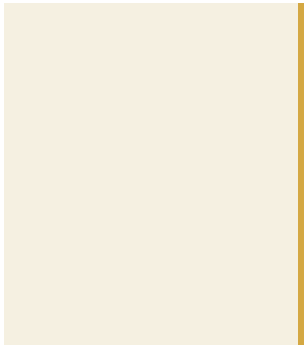
Detail	Info
Servings	6 funnel cakes
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	20 minutes
Total Time	30 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- The Squeeze Bottle Method: A plastic squeeze bottle (like a ketchup bottle) gives you the most control over the batter flow. This is the secret of the fast food booth operators.
- Churro Funnel Cake: Dust with cinnamon sugar instead of powdered sugar.
- Apple Pie Version: Top with warm cinnamon-spiced apple slices and whipped cream.
- Chocolate Drizzle: Zigzag warm Nutella or chocolate sauce across the top.
- Keep Oil Temperature Steady: If the oil is too cool, the funnel cake absorbs oil and gets greasy. Too hot, and it browns before cooking through. 375°F is the sweet spot.

## Did You Know?

> The Iowa State Fair — held every August in Des Moines — is one of the oldest and largest agricultural fairs in the country, and food is its beating heart. The Fair is famous for putting virtually everything "on a stick," but funnel cake reigns as the queen of the midway. The treat's origins trace



back to Pennsylvania Dutch (German) immigrants who brought \*Drechter Kuche\* (funnel cake) to America in the 1700s. It spread through German-settled regions of the Midwest and became a carnival staple by the mid-20th century. The Iowa State Fair alone serves tens of thousands of funnel cakes each year, and the sight of someone walking through the midway with a paper plate of powdered-sugar-dusted funnel cake is as iconic as the fair's famous Butter Cow sculpture.

\* Photography note: A crispy golden funnel cake on a white paper plate, absolutely covered in powdered sugar, with a few strawberries on top. Background suggests a state fair midway — colorful lights, Ferris wheel blur. Bright, festive, fun. Maybe a hand reaching to tear off a piece.\*



# Michigan Cherry Pie

*Michigan, US*

*A quintessential Midwestern dessert, this pie celebrates Michigan's abundant tart cherries in a sweet-tart filling, encased in a flaky, golden crust—a taste of summer's bounty.*

## Ingredients

- For the Pie Crust (double crust recipe):
- 2 ½ cups (300g) all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 cup (226g) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes
- ½ cup (120ml) ice water, plus more if needed
- For the Cherry Filling:
- 6 cups (about 2 lbs / 900g) fresh or frozen tart cherries, pitted (do not thaw if frozen)
- 1 cup (200g) granulated sugar (adjust to cherry tartness)
- ¼ cup (30g) all-purpose flour or 3 tbsp cornstarch (for thickening)
- 1 tbsp lemon juice (freshly squeezed)
- ½ tsp almond extract (optional, enhances cherry flavor)
- 2 tbsp (28g) unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- For Egg Wash (optional):
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 tbsp water
- 1 tbsp granulated sugar (for sprinkling)

## Instructions

- 1 **Make Pie Crust:** In a large bowl, whisk together flour and salt. Cut in cold butter with a pastry blender or your fingertips until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs with some pea-sized butter pieces. Gradually add ice water, 1 tablespoon at a time, mixing until dough just comes together. Do not overmix. Divide dough in half, flatten into discs, wrap in plastic, and chill for at least 30 minutes.
- 2 **Prepare Cherries:** In a large bowl, combine pitted cherries, granulated sugar, flour (or cornstarch), and lemon juice. If using, add almond extract. Stir gently to combine.
- 3 **Roll Out Crusts:** On a lightly floured surface, roll out one disc of dough into a 12-inch (30 cm) circle. Carefully transfer to a 9-inch (23 cm) pie plate. Trim edges, leaving about ½-inch overhang.
- 4 **Add Filling:** Pour the cherry filling into the pie crust. Dot the top of the filling with the small pieces of butter.
- 5 **Top Crust:** Roll out the second disc of dough. Place over the filling, or cut into strips to create a lattice top. Trim and crimp the edges of both crusts together to seal.
- 6 **Vent & Egg Wash (Optional):** Cut a few slits in the top crust (if not making lattice) to allow steam to escape. If desired, whisk together egg and water for an egg wash, brush over the top crust, and sprinkle with granulated sugar.
- 7 **Bake:** Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). Place pie on a baking sheet (to catch any drips). Bake for 15 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 375°F (190°C) and continue baking for 35-45 minutes more, or until the crust is golden brown and the filling is bubbling. If the crust browns too quickly, loosely tent with foil.
- 8 **Cool & Serve:** Transfer pie to a wire rack and let cool completely for at least 3-4 hours before slicing and serving. This is crucial for the filling to set properly. Serve at room temperature, perhaps with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	30 minutes
Cook Time	50-60 minutes
Total Time	1.5 - 2 hours (plus cooling time)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- Always use \*tart\* cherries for this recipe; sweet cherries will make the pie overly sweet.
- For a firmer filling, increase the cornstarch to 4 tablespoons.
- If using frozen cherries, do not thaw them first, as this can make the filling too watery.
- A pinch of cardamom in the filling can add a subtle, warm spice note.

## Did You Know?

> Michigan proudly holds the title of the "Cherry Capital of the World," especially for its tart Montmorency cherries, primarily grown in the Traverse City region. Cherry pie is more than just a dessert here; it's a culinary emblem, deeply tied to the state's agricultural heritage and summer festivals. Enjoying a slice of Michigan Cherry Pie is a direct taste of the heartland's sweet and tart bounty, celebrated with pride.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A freshly baked Michigan Cherry Pie, golden-cruled (perhaps with a lattice top), with a slice already removed, showcasing the vibrant, bubbling red cherry filling. The pie sits on a wooden cutting board on a simple, textured linen tablecloth. A scoop of melting vanilla ice cream next to the slice. Soft, warm, natural light from a window, emphasizing the texture and inviting warmth.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a whole pie to any potluck or family gathering, and offer you the biggest slice.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A warm summer evening on the porch, a scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream, and stories of cherry-picking in Traverse City.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Michigan Cherry Pie**

> "Grandma Dorothy always added a tiny pinch of cinnamon (about ¼ teaspoon!) to her cherry filling. 'It just adds a little warmth and depth to the cherries,' she'd wink, 'makes it taste extra special, like a hug in every bite!'"



## Rhubarb Crisp with Oat Topping

*Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin — Anywhere the Rhubarb Patch Survived Another Winter*

*Tart, ruby-red rhubarb baked under a thick blanket of buttery, brown-sugary oat crumble until the fruit is bubbling and jammy and the topping is shatteringly crisp at the edges, chewy in the middle. Served warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream that*

*melts into a pool of sweet cream rivers between the craggy peaks of oat topping. This is what the rhubarb was growing for.*

## Ingredients

- The Rhubarb Filling
- 6 cups fresh rhubarb, cut into ½-inch pieces (about 2 pounds)
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Zest of 1 orange (optional but lovely)
- The Oat Topping
- 1 cup old-fashioned rolled oats
- ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup packed brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup (1 stick) cold unsalted butter, cut into small cubes
- For Serving
- Vanilla ice cream (not optional, no matter what the recipe says)

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat.** Set your oven to 375°F. Butter a 9 × 9-inch baking dish (or an 8 × 11 for a thinner, crispier version).
- 2 **Make the filling.** In a large bowl, toss the rhubarb pieces with the sugar, flour, cornstarch, vanilla, and orange zest. Let it sit for 10 minutes while you make the topping — the sugar will start pulling juice from the rhubarb, which is exactly what you want.
- 3 **Make the topping.** In a separate bowl, combine the oats, flour, brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt. Add the cold butter cubes and work them in with your fingers (or a pastry blender) until the mixture resembles coarse, clumpy crumbles — some pea-sized butter pieces remaining is good. They'll melt in the oven and create pockets of buttery crunch.
- 4 **Assemble.** Pour the rhubarb filling into the prepared baking dish, spreading evenly. Scatter the oat topping over the rhubarb in thick, uneven clumps. Don't press it down — you want air and texture, not a flat lid.
- 5 **Bake.** Bake for 40–45 minutes, until the topping is golden brown and crispy and the rhubarb filling is visibly bubbling around the edges. If the topping is browning too quickly, tent loosely with foil for the last 10 minutes.
- 6 **Rest and serve.** Let the crisp cool for at least 10 minutes (the filling will be volcanic). Serve warm with a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream. Watch the ice cream melt into the hot fruit. Experience joy.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Bake Time	40–45 minutes
Total Time	1 hour
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts

## Midwest Nice Rating:

This is the dessert that ends potluck arguments. Bring a rhubarb crisp in June and you'll be remembered until October.

## Tips & Variations

- Strawberry-Rhubarb: Replace 2 cups of rhubarb with 2 cups of sliced strawberries. This is the classic crowd-pleaser combination — the strawberries add sweetness and color. A little less sugar in the filling (reduce to ½ cup) since the berries bring their own.
- Frozen Rhubarb: Works perfectly. Don't thaw it — toss the frozen pieces directly with the sugar and flour. It'll release more juice, so add an extra tablespoon of cornstarch.
- Rhubarb Source: If you don't have a rhubarb patch, you probably know someone who does. Midwesterners with rhubarb are desperate to give it away by July. Accept the rhubarb. Make the crisp. Return a portion of the crisp. This is the social contract.

- Pecan Topping: Add ½ cup chopped pecans to the oat topping for extra crunch.
- Crisp vs. Crumble vs. Cobbler: A crisp has oats in the topping. A crumble doesn't. A cobbler has a biscuit-like dough. A buckle has cake batter. A grunt is cooked on the stovetop. A slump is baked. A betty has bread crumbs. Nobody remembers the rules. Just call it a crisp and move on.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"Freeze the butter and grate it on a box grater instead of cutting it into cubes. It mixes into the dry ingredients more evenly and melts into flatter, crunchier layers. Also, a splash of fresh orange juice in the filling — not enough to taste citrusy, just enough to brighten the rhubarb."\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A porch swing, the long light of a June evening, a scoop of ice cream that was on sale at Hy-Vee, and the annual threat to rip out the rhubarb patch that absolutely no one will ever follow through on.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Rhubarb is technically a vegetable, but in 1947 a U.S. customs court in Buffalo, New York, classified it as a fruit because it's used primarily as a fruit in the United States. This was a tax decision (fruits had lower tariffs), and it's the kind of pragmatic compromise the Midwest respects. Rhubarb thrives in cold climates with harsh winters — it actually needs a freeze period to grow properly — which is why the Upper Midwest is rhubarb country. Nearly every farmstead had a rhubarb patch, usually planted by a grandmother and inherited like furniture. The plant is perennial and nearly indestructible; patches have survived decades of neglect, harsh winters, and being driven over by tractors. Rhubarb was once called the "pie plant" because its primary culinary purpose was filling pies and crisps with its bracingly tart, jammy fruit. In the Midwest, rhubarb season (May through July) is treated with the same reverence as sweet corn season — a narrow window of perfection that you do not waste.

\* Photography note: A baking dish of rhubarb crisp, the oat topping golden and craggy, pink-red rhubarb filling bubbling up at the edges. One portion scooped out, served in a bowl with a scoop of melting vanilla ice cream. A garden setting — maybe a rhubarb plant in the background. Late afternoon light. The photo should feel like summer in Minnesota.\*



# Scotcheroos

*Iowa & Minnesota — State Fair Country*

*Chewy, peanut-buttery Rice Krispie bars topped with a thick, glossy layer of melted butterscotch and chocolate chips that sets into a satisfying snap. Imagine a Rice Krispie Treat went to finishing school and came back dangerous. One pan yields enough to feed a church basement, a school bake sale, or your own secret midnight cravings for a week.*

## Ingredients

- The Base
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup light corn syrup
- 1 cup creamy peanut butter
- 6 cups Rice Krispies cereal
- The Topping
- 1 cup butterscotch chips
- 1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips

## Instructions

- 1 Prep the pan.** Lightly grease a 9 × 13-inch baking pan with butter or cooking spray. Line with parchment paper for easy removal if you're feeling fancy.
- 2 Cook the sugar mixture.** In a large saucepan over medium heat, combine the sugar and corn syrup. Stir constantly until the mixture comes to a rolling boil and the sugar is fully dissolved. Remove from heat immediately — do not overcook or it will harden.
- 3 Add the peanut butter.** Stir the peanut butter into the hot sugar mixture until completely smooth and combined.
- 4 Add the cereal.** Pour in the Rice Krispies and fold gently with a rubber spatula until every piece is coated. Work quickly — the mixture starts to set as it cools.
- 5 Press into the pan.** Transfer the mixture to the prepared pan and press it into an even layer. Use the back of a greased spatula or a piece of wax paper to press firmly — you want it compact enough to hold together but not so dense it loses its crunch.
- 6 Make the topping.** In a microwave-safe bowl, combine the butterscotch chips and chocolate chips. Microwave in 30-second intervals, stirring between each, until completely smooth and melted (about 90 seconds total). Alternatively, melt in a double boiler over simmering water.
- 7 Top and set.** Pour the melted butterscotch-chocolate mixture over the cereal base and spread into an even layer with an offset spatula. Let it set at room temperature for about 30 minutes, or refrigerate for 15 minutes if you're impatient.
- 8 Cut and serve.** Once the topping is set (firm to the touch but still slightly yielding), cut into bars. Smaller bars are sensible. Larger bars are correct.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	24 bars
Prep Time	15 minutes
Set Time	30 minutes
Total Time	45 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts / No-Bake

### Midwest Nice Rating:

These vanish at every potluck, bake sale, and "I just need to bring \*something\*" situation. They're the MVP of the dessert table.

### Tips & Variations

- Don't Overheat the Topping: If you overheat the chocolate-butterscotch mixture, it can seize up and turn grainy. Low and slow. Stir constantly. The moment it's smooth, stop heating.
- Peanut Butter Quality: Standard Jif or Skippy works perfectly here — the stabilizers help the bars hold together. Natural peanut butter (the oil-separating kind) will make the base crumbly and oily. Save

your fancy peanut butter for toast.

- Butterscotch is the Star: The butterscotch chips are what make these scotcheroos, not just chocolate-peanut-butter bars. Don't skip them. Don't substitute caramel. The butterscotch provides a warm, almost toffee-like flavor that ties the whole thing together.

- Storage: Keep in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days. They also freeze well — cut into bars, freeze on a sheet pan, then stack with wax paper between layers. Pull out as needed. Future you will be grateful.

- Extra Fancy: Drizzle additional melted chocolate or butterscotch on top after the first layer sets. Sprinkle with flaky sea salt. You've now made something that could sell at a bakery.

> Grandma's Secret: *"Add a tiny pinch of salt to the peanut butter mixture — it's the difference between 'good' and 'I need the recipe.'* And cut them with a plastic knife. Sounds crazy, but the chocolate topping won't crack and crumble the way it does with a metal knife."*\**

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Ziploc bag in your car's glove compartment, a 4-H meeting, the Iowa State Fair at 2 PM when you need fuel for the butter cow, and a glass of ice-cold milk consumed standing at the kitchen counter at 11 PM.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Scotcheroos first appeared on the back of a Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal box in the 1960s, and their rise to Midwest fame was swift and permanent. The recipe is so popular in Iowa that it's essentially the unofficial state dessert — they appear at every church potluck, school function, and office birthday celebration. The Iowa State Fair, which draws over a million visitors annually, has scotcheroo vendors scattered throughout the grounds. The recipe's genius is in its simplicity: no baking required, minimal ingredients, virtually impossible to mess up, and the result looks far more impressive than the effort involved. They sit at the perfect intersection of homemade and effortless, which is the sweet spot of Midwestern baking. The name "scotcheroo" — which sounds like it was invented by a 1960s ad copywriter (because it was) — has become so embedded in regional vocabulary that Midwesterners are often surprised to learn that people in other parts of the country have never heard of them.

\* Photography note: Scotcheroos cut into bars on a parchment-lined cutting board, the glossy chocolate-butterscotch topping catching the light, one bar turned on its side to show the crispy peanut butter base. Maybe a glass of milk nearby. Bright, cheerful lighting — bake sale energy. The photo should make you want to eat three of these.\*



# Snickerdoodles

*Midwest US*

*A classic for a reason, Snickerdoodles are soft, chewy cookies with a signature crackled top, generously coated in a sweet and spicy cinnamon-sugar mixture—a comforting taste of home in every bite.*

## Ingredients

- 2 ¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp cream of tartar
- 1 tsp baking soda
- ¼ tsp salt
- 1 cup (226g) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 ½ cups (300g) granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- For the Cinnamon-Sugar Coating:
  - ¼ cup (50g) granulated sugar
  - 2 tbsp ground cinnamon

## Instructions

- 1 Whisk Dry Ingredients:** In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, cream of tartar, baking soda, and salt. Set aside.
- 2 Cream Butter & Sugar:** In a large bowl, using an electric mixer, cream together the softened butter and 1 ½ cups granulated sugar until light and fluffy, about 2-3 minutes.
- 3 Add Eggs & Vanilla:** Beat in the eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Stir in the vanilla extract.
- 4 Combine Wet & Dry:** Gradually add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients, mixing on low speed until just combined. Do not overmix. The dough will be soft.
- 5 Chill Dough:** Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and chill the dough in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes. This helps prevent the cookies from spreading too much.
- 6 Preheat Oven & Prepare Coating:** Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C). In a small shallow dish, combine ¼ cup granulated sugar and 2 tbsp ground cinnamon for the coating.
- 7 Shape & Coat Cookies:** Scoop rounded tablespoons of dough and roll them into balls. Roll each dough ball generously in the cinnamon-sugar mixture, ensuring it's fully coated.
- 8 Bake:** Place the coated dough balls 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake for 8-10 minutes, or until the edges are set and lightly golden, but the centers are still soft and slightly puffy. The tops will have characteristic crackles.
- 9 Cool:** Remove cookies from the oven and let them cool on the baking sheets for 2-3 minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool completely.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	2-3 dozen cookies
Prep Time	15 minutes (plus 30 min chilling)
Cook Time	8-10 minutes per batch
Total Time	45-55 minutes (plus chilling)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- For an extra chewy cookie, underbake them slightly so the centers are very soft when they come out of the oven.
- Ensure your cream of tartar is fresh; it's essential for the unique tangy flavor and chewy texture of Snickerdoodles.
- For a warmer spice profile, add a pinch of nutmeg or ground cloves to the cinnamon-sugar coating.
- Make ahead: Dough balls can be rolled in cinnamon sugar and frozen on a baking sheet. Once solid, transfer to a freezer-safe bag and bake from frozen, adding a few minutes to the baking time.

## Did You Know?

> Snickerdoodles are believed to have German or Dutch origins, possibly deriving from a German word like "Schneckenudeln" (snail noodles), which refers to a sweet pastry. However, they became a distinctly American cookie, especially popular in New England and later, the Midwest. Their whimsical name and comforting cinnamon-sugar flavor have made them a cherished treat for generations, often found in school lunchboxes, holiday cookie platters, and church bake sales across the heartland.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A stack of warm, crackled Snickerdoodles on a cooling rack or a simple white plate. A few loose cinnamon-sugar crystals are visible on the table. A glass of cold milk nearby. Soft, natural light from a window, emphasizing the texture and inviting warmth of the cookies.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bake a fresh batch for any occasion, and insist you take a plate home "for the road.")

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A snowy afternoon with a cup of hot cocoa, a school bake sale fundraiser, and the comforting sounds of a bustling kitchen during the holidays.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Snickerdoodles**

> "Grandma Marge always added a tiny pinch of cardamom (just an eighth of a teaspoon!) to her cinnamon-sugar coating. 'It just gives it that extra special something,' she'd whisper, 'a little warmth that makes everyone ask for my recipe, but they never quite guess what it is!'"



# Sugar Cream Pie

*Indiana, US (Hoosier Pie)*

*A humble yet utterly delightful dessert, Indiana Sugar Cream Pie, often called "Hoosier Pie," features a silky, sweet vanilla-custard filling baked in a flaky crust—a true taste of rustic Midwestern comfort.*

## Ingredients

- 1 (9-inch / 23 cm) unbaked pie crust (homemade or store-bought)
- 1 ½ cups (300g) granulated sugar
- ½ cup (60g) all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp ground nutmeg, plus more for sprinkling
- 2 cups (480ml) heavy cream or half-and-half (do not use milk)
- ¼ cup (56g) unsalted butter, melted
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

## Instructions

- 1 **Preheat Oven & Prepare Crust:** Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C). Place the unbaked pie crust in a 9-inch (23 cm) pie plate.
- 2 **Whisk Dry Ingredients:** In a medium bowl, whisk together the granulated sugar, flour, and ½ tsp nutmeg until thoroughly combined. This helps prevent lumps in the filling.
- 3 **Combine Wet Ingredients:** In a separate medium bowl, whisk together the heavy cream (or half-and-half), melted butter, and vanilla extract.
- 4 **Form Filling:** Gradually whisk the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients until smooth.
- 5 **Pour into Crust:** Pour the creamy filling into the unbaked pie crust.
- 6 **Bake:** Bake for 15 minutes at 400°F (200°C).
- 7 **Reduce Heat & Finish Baking:** Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F (175°C) and continue baking for another 30-40 minutes, or until the edges are set but the center still has a slight jiggle. The pie will firm up as it cools. If the crust starts to brown too quickly, you can loosely tent it with aluminum foil.
- 8 **Cool & Serve:** Transfer the pie to a wire rack and let it cool completely for at least 3-4 hours before slicing and serving. This is crucial for the filling to set properly. Sprinkle with a little extra nutmeg just before serving, if desired.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	45-55 minutes
Total Time	1 hour - 1 hour 10 minutes (plus cooling)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Desserts

## Tips & Variations

- For an extra rich flavor, use all heavy cream. Half-and-half will yield a slightly lighter but still delicious pie.
- Ensure the filling ingredients are at room temperature for a smoother consistency.
- If your pie crust is prone to shrinking, you can blind bake it for 10-15 minutes before adding the filling.
- Serve slightly chilled or at room temperature. It doesn't typically need whipped cream, but a dollop can be a nice addition.

## Did You Know?

> Sugar Cream Pie is Indiana's official state pie and a true culinary emblem of the Hoosier State. Originating with early Shaker and Quaker settlers, it was a practical "desperation pie" made with readily available pantry staples (sugar, cream, flour, spices) during times when fresh fruit was scarce.

This simple, unpretentious dessert became a beloved tradition, symbolizing the resourcefulness and comforting spirit of Midwestern home baking.

\* Photography note: Rustic farmhouse style. A beautifully baked Sugar Cream Pie, sliced to reveal its smooth, creamy, pale golden filling. A sprinkle of fresh nutmeg on top. Served on a simple ceramic plate, on a rustic wooden table, with soft, natural light from a window. A vintage pie server should be partially submerged in a slice.\*

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### **Midwest Nice Rating**

5/5 (Will bring a whole pie to any potluck or family gathering, and quietly make sure everyone gets a generous slice, especially the kids.)

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### **Pairs Well With**

Pairs well with: A quiet afternoon on the porch, a cup of strong black coffee, and stories of simpler times and family traditions.

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### **Grandma's Secret: Sugar Cream Pie**

> "Grandma Eleanor always added a tiny splash of bourbon (just a teaspoon!) to her cream filling before baking. 'It just deepens the vanilla and warms up the spices,' she'd whisper, 'a little something extra that makes it truly irresistible, bless its heart!'"

# **Snacks & Confections**



# Cheese and Sausage Board

*Midwest — The Gathering Centerpiece*

*Forget fancy charcuterie — this is the Heartland version. Sharp Wisconsin cheddars, smoky summer sausage, tangy pickles, and hearty crackers arranged on a board that invites everyone to dig in. It's the appetizer that feels like home, perfect for football Sundays, holidays, and any excuse to gather.*

## Ingredients

- The Cheeses (choose 4–5)
- 8 oz sharp Wisconsin cheddar, cubed or sliced
- 8 oz Colby Jack cheese, cubed
- 6 oz smoked Gouda, wedge or sliced
- 4 oz creamy Havarti, sliced
- 6 oz Wisconsin brick cheese, cubed
- 4 oz cheese curds (fresh, squeaky ones!)
- The Meats (choose 2–3)
- 12 oz summer sausage, sliced into rounds
- 8 oz hard salami, sliced
- 6 oz beef sticks or snack sticks
- 8 oz smoked kielbasa, sliced on the bias
- The Accompaniments
- 1 cup whole grain mustard
- ½ cup honey (for drizzling)
- 1 cup dill pickle spears or chips
- 1 cup pickled jalapeños or giardiniera
- 1 cup green olives or mixed olives
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- ½ cup mixed nuts (almonds, cashews)
- The Vessels
- 1 sleeve buttery crackers (like Ritz)
- 1 sleeve wheat crackers
- 1 small baguette, sliced
- Pretzel crisps or soft pretzel bites

## Instructions

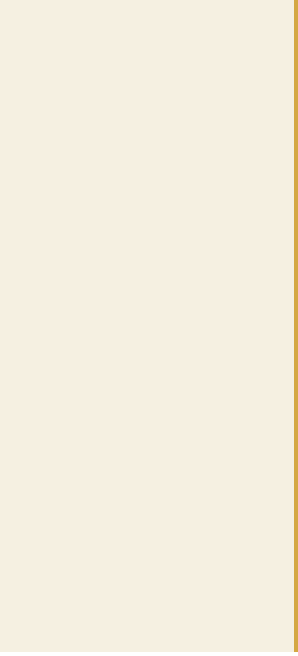
- 1 **Start with the board.** Choose a large wooden cutting board, slate board, or a big platter. Give yourself plenty of room — crowded boards are hard to navigate.
- 2 **Place the cheeses first.** Arrange cheeses in different areas of the board, leaving space between them. Cut some into cubes, leave others in wedges, and fan out slices. Variety in shape makes it more visually appealing and easier to grab.
- 3 **Add the meats.** Fold salami slices into quarters or roll them. Fan summer sausage in overlapping rows. Scatter beef sticks for casual grabbing. Place meats near their cheese companions.
- 4 **Add small bowls.** Place small bowls or ramekins on the board for mustard, honey, olives, and pickled items. This prevents runny items from making everything soggy.
- 5 **Fill the gaps.** Tuck crackers, bread slices, and pretzels into empty spaces around the edges and between items. Stack them or fan them for visual interest.
- 6 **Finish with pops of color.** Scatter dried cranberries, nuts, and fresh herbs (if desired) to fill remaining gaps and add color contrast.
- 7 **Provide tools.** Set out small cheese knives, toothpicks or small forks, and spreaders for the mustard.
- 8 **Serve at room temperature.** Remove from the refrigerator 20–30 minutes before serving. Cheese tastes best when not ice cold.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	10–12 (as appetizer)
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	None
Total Time	20 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Snacks

## Tips & Variations

- Wisconsin Cheese Focus: Stick to Wisconsin cheeses for the most authentic Heartland board — cheddar, Colby, brick, and fresh cheese curds are all made there.
- Make It Local: Visit a local cheese shop or farmer's market for artisanal cheeses from your region.
- Summer Sausage: Look for Usinger's, Klement's, or other Midwestern summer sausage brands for authenticity.
- Kid-Friendly Section: Reserve one corner with milder cheese, plain crackers, and grapes for young eaters.
- Sweet Addition: Add apple slices and grapes for freshness and color.
- Spicy Version: Include pepper Jack cheese, pickled jalapeños, and spicy mustard.
- Make Ahead: Cube cheeses and slice meats a day ahead. Refrigerate separately and assemble just before serving.



- Holiday Board: Add themed elements — cranberry sauce and turkey summer sausage for Thanksgiving, or festive picks for Christmas.

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### **Did You Know?**

> While coastal cities embraced the French-influenced "charcuterie board," the Midwest was already building its own version: the cheese and sausage board. Wisconsin, America's Dairyland, produces more cheese than any other state — over 3 billion pounds annually. German immigrants brought summer sausage and hard salami traditions, while Polish communities contributed kielbasa. The combination became a tailgating and holiday staple, appearing on coffee tables from Green Bay to Kansas City. Unlike fussy charcuterie with paper-thin prosciutto and imported Manchego, the Midwestern board is hearty and unpretentious — designed for big appetites and bigger gatherings. It says, "pull up a chair, grab a plate, and help yourself."

\* Photography note: Large wooden cutting board overflowing with colorful arrangement — golden cheddar cubes, white cheese curds, pink summer sausage rounds, crackers fanned out, small bowl of grainy mustard, green olives, dried cranberries scattered. Relaxed, inviting styling. Casual setting with football game on TV blurred in background. Warm, social lighting.\*



## Classic Popcorn Balls

*Across the Midwest — Halloween, Harvest Festivals, and School Carnivals*

*Freshly popped corn held together by a warm, sticky, buttery-sweet syrup and shaped by greased hands into big, crunchy, slightly unwieldy spheres. Popcorn balls are the original Midwestern snack — older than your grandma, simpler than your toaster, and guaranteed to pull out at least one filling if you've got dental work.*

## Ingredients

- 12 cups freshly popped popcorn (about ½ cup unpopped kernels)
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- ½ cup water
- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon white vinegar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

## Instructions

- 1 **Pop the corn.** Pop your popcorn using whatever method you prefer — stovetop, air popper, or microwave (plain, not the buttered stuff). Remove all unpopped kernels — they are a tooth hazard and a lawsuit waiting to happen. Place the popped corn in a very large bowl, ideally the biggest one you own.
- 2 **Make the syrup.** In a medium heavy-bottomed saucepan, combine the sugar, corn syrup, water, butter, vinegar, and salt. Stir over medium heat until the sugar dissolves and the butter melts. Stop stirring once it comes to a boil. Let it boil, undisturbed, until a candy thermometer reads 250°F (hard-ball stage). This takes about 8–10 minutes. Watch it — syrup can go from perfect to burned in seconds.
- 3 **Add vanilla.** Remove the syrup from heat and carefully stir in the vanilla. It will bubble and steam. This is fine.
- 4 **Combine.** Pour the hot syrup over the popcorn and toss with a wooden spoon or rubber spatula, working quickly to coat as much popcorn as possible. Move fast — the syrup starts to set immediately.
- 5 **Shape.** As soon as the mixture is cool enough to handle (but still warm and pliable), grease your hands generously with butter or cooking spray. Grab a generous handful of the coated popcorn and press it firmly into a ball, roughly the size of a softball. Compact it enough to hold together but don't crush the popcorn. Set each ball on wax paper or parchment to cool.
- 6 **Cool and wrap.** Let the popcorn balls cool completely, about 15 minutes. Wrap individually in plastic wrap, wax paper, or cellophane for giving away. Or just leave them in a bowl and watch them disappear.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	12–15 balls
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	10 minutes
Total Time	30 minutes (including shaping)
Difficulty	Easy (but work fast)
Category	Snacks

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Peak autumn energy. Popcorn balls are to October what cookies are to December. Every harvest festival, Halloween party, and school carnival has a table of these.

## Tips & Variations

- Work FAST. The syrup sets quickly. If it hardens before you've shaped all the balls, return the pot to low heat for a minute to re-melt, then continue. Having a helper for the shaping step is extremely useful.
- Candy Thermometer Essential: 250°F (hard-ball stage) is the sweet spot. Too low and the balls won't hold together. Too high and they'll be rock-hard and aggressive toward teeth.
- Caramel Popcorn Balls: Use brown sugar instead of white and increase the butter to ½ cup. The result is darker, more caramelly, and deeply addictive.

- Autumn Harvest Version: Add ½ cup candy corn, ½ cup pretzel pieces, and ½ cup peanuts to the popcorn before pouring the syrup. Festive, salty-sweet, and perfect for a fall party.
- Marshmallow Popcorn Balls: For a softer, chewier ball, melt 4 tablespoons of butter with a 10-oz bag of marshmallows instead of making the sugar syrup. Mix with popcorn and shape. Easier, softer, and kid-friendlier.
- Food Coloring: A few drops of food coloring in the syrup (orange for Halloween, red and green for Christmas) makes them festive.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"Rub your hands with real butter, not cooking spray — the butter tastes better if any gets on the popcorn, and your hands stay softer. And pop the corn in coconut oil on the stovetop. It makes the popcorn taste like the movies. Microwave popcorn has no soul."*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A hayride, a corn maze, the kind of crisp October evening where you can see your breath, and a mild but genuine concern about the structural integrity of your dental fillings.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Popcorn has deep Midwestern roots — quite literally. Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, and Nebraska are the top popcorn-producing states, and the Midwest grows the vast majority of the world's popcorn. The first commercial popcorn balls appeared in the late 1800s, when sugar syrup and popped corn came together in what was essentially the original American snack bar. They became a staple at fairs, carnivals, and holiday celebrations. During the early 20th century, popcorn balls were a common Halloween treat — neighbors would make them and hand them out to trick-or-treaters. This tradition faded with (largely unfounded) fears about tampered homemade treats, and popcorn balls were replaced by commercially wrapped candy. But in small towns across the Midwest, the tradition persists — you'll still find neighbors handing out popcorn balls on Halloween night, and nobody thinks twice about it, because in small towns, you know who made them and you trust their kitchen.

\* Photography note: A pile of golden popcorn balls on a sheet of wax paper, some wrapped in cellophane with twist-ties, some bare and showing the craggy popcorn texture. Maybe some autumn leaves or a small pumpkin in the background. Warm, harvest-season lighting. The photo should feel like an October kitchen counter.\*



## Peanut Brittle

*Across the Midwest — Holiday Tins, Gift Bags, and Grandma's Kitchen*

*A thin, shattering sheet of amber-gold caramelized sugar studded with roasted peanuts, snapped into jagged, glassy shards that crack between your teeth with a sound that's half candy, half destruction. Peanut brittle is the candy that makes you feel like a chemist, tastes like a holiday, and sounds like you're chewing gravel — in the best possible way.*

## Ingredients

- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- ¼ cup water
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups raw peanuts (skins on or off — your call)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

## Instructions

- 1 Prep your surface.** Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat and grease it lightly with butter. Have the butter, baking soda, and vanilla measured and ready by the stove. Once the sugar hits temperature, you'll have about 30 seconds to add everything — this is not the time to search for the baking soda.
- 2 Cook the sugar.** In a large heavy-bottomed saucepan, combine the sugar, corn syrup, water, and salt. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the sugar dissolves and the mixture begins to boil.
- 3 Add the peanuts.** Once boiling, add the raw peanuts. Attach your candy thermometer and continue cooking, stirring frequently, until the mixture reaches 300°F (hard-crack stage). This takes 15–20 minutes. The mixture will go through stages — first foamy and white, then golden, then amber. The peanuts will darken and smell roasted. When it hits 300°F and the color is a warm amber-gold, move fast.
- 4 The 30-second finish.** Remove from heat immediately. Working quickly, stir in the butter until melted, then add the baking soda and vanilla. The mixture will foam up dramatically and turn lighter and more opaque — this is the baking soda creating air bubbles, which is what makes the brittle light and crispy instead of dense and tooth-breaking.
- 5 Pour and spread.** Immediately pour the mixture onto the prepared baking sheet. Using a greased spatula or the back of a greased wooden spoon, spread it as thin as possible. Work fast — it sets quickly. Thinner = crunchier and more elegant. Thicker = more rustic and chewy.
- 6 Cool completely.** Let the brittle cool at room temperature for at least 30 minutes. It will harden as it cools. Once completely cool and rigid, break it into irregular shards by hand or by gently whacking it with the handle of a knife.
- 7 Store.** Keep in an airtight container at room temperature, with pieces separated by wax paper. Properly stored, peanut brittle keeps for 2–3 weeks. Package in tins for gifting.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	About 1½ pounds
Prep Time	5 minutes
Cook Time	20–25 minutes
Cool Time	30 minutes
Total Time	1 hour
Difficulty	Moderate (candy thermometer required)
Category	Snacks / Candy

### Midwest Nice Rating:

Christmas tin royalty. Peanut brittle in a decorative tin is the Midwest's most dignified edible gift, right alongside fudge and those butter cookies everyone keeps sewing supplies in.

## Tips & Variations

- Candy Thermometer is Non-Negotiable. The difference between 290°F (chewy and underwhelming) and 310°F (burnt and bitter) is narrow. Use a thermometer. Clip it to the pot. Trust the numbers.
  - Raw Peanuts: Use raw (not roasted) peanuts — they'll roast in the sugar syrup as it cooks. Pre-roasted peanuts will over-toast and taste bitter by the time the sugar reaches 300°F.
  - Baking Soda Magic: The baking soda reacts with the acidic sugar syrup, creating thousands of tiny CO2 bubbles that make the brittle airy and light. Without it, you'd have peanut toffee — good but not brittle. Don't skip it.
  - Cashew Brittle: Substitute cashews for peanuts. Add them later (at 275°F) since cashews are softer and burn more easily.
  - Spiced Brittle: Add ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper with the baking soda for a sweet-heat brittle that's dangerously addictive.
  - Microwave Method: For beginners, there are microwave peanut brittle recipes that work surprisingly well. They won't have quite the same depth of caramelization, but they're much less intimidating.
  - Humidity Warning: Peanut brittle absorbs moisture from the air. Don't make it on a rainy or humid day, and store it sealed. Soggy brittle is sad brittle.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"Pull and stretch the brittle right after you pour it — grab the edges with greased hands and pull gently to make it thinner. Thinner brittle is always better. And a tiny pinch of cayenne pepper — just enough that people can't figure out why they can't stop eating it."*\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Christmas tin that also contains fudge, peppermint bark, and those inexplicable ribbon candies nobody actually likes. The entire tin will be consumed by December 27th. The brittle will be gone first.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Peanut brittle is an American candy classic with murky origins — various legends attribute it to a Southern cook who accidentally added baking soda to taffy, a New England candy maker's experiment, or a Midwestern farm wife's adaptation of European nut confections. What's clear is that peanut brittle became a holiday staple across the Midwest by the early 20th century, aided by the region's abundance of corn syrup (a key ingredient) and its culture of homemade holiday candy-making. Before the era of commercial candy, families made their own: brittle, fudge, divinity, taffy, and hard candies. Peanut brittle was the showstopper — the candy that required skill, timing, and a certain fearlessness around boiling sugar. Making it was a rite of passage. Receiving a tin of someone's homemade brittle was (and is) a gesture of genuine affection. In the Midwest, where emotions are expressed through food rather than words, a tin of peanut brittle says "I care about you" in the clearest possible terms.

\* Photography note: Jagged shards of golden peanut brittle scattered on parchment paper, peanuts visible in the amber candy, some pieces stacked. Maybe a festive tin nearby, partially filled. Holiday lighting — warm, golden, cozy. The photo should look like a Christmas kitchen with candy cooling on the counter.\*



## Puppy Chow (Muddy Buddies)

*Midwest — Every Kitchen, Every Party*

*Chex cereal coated in melted chocolate and peanut butter, then tumbled in a blizzard of powdered sugar until every piece is a sweet, crunchy, impossibly addictive little cloud. Call it Puppy Chow or Muddy Buddies — just don't think you can eat only one handful.*

## Ingredients

- 9 cups Rice Chex cereal (or Corn Chex — or a mix of both)
- 1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips
- ½ cup creamy peanut butter
- ¼ cup unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1½ cups powdered sugar

## Instructions

- 1 **Measure the cereal.** Pour 9 cups of Chex cereal into a very large bowl (the biggest you have — you need room to toss). Set aside.
- 2 **Melt the coating.** In a microwave-safe bowl, combine the chocolate chips, peanut butter, and butter. Microwave in 30-second intervals, stirring between each, until the mixture is completely smooth and glossy (usually about 90 seconds total). Stir in the vanilla extract.
- 3 **Coat the cereal.** Pour the warm chocolate-peanut butter mixture over the Chex cereal. Using a rubber spatula, gently fold and toss — be thorough but gentle. You want every piece coated, but you don't want to crush the cereal into crumbs. Take your time.
- 4 **The powdered sugar step.** This is where the magic happens. Pour the powdered sugar into a large gallon-sized zip-top bag (or a large paper grocery bag for the truly old-school method). Add the coated cereal to the bag. Seal it up and shake, shake, shake until every single piece is covered in a thick white coat of powdered sugar. The more you shake, the better it gets.
- 5 **Cool and dry.** Spread the puppy chow out on a large sheet of wax paper or parchment in a single layer. Let it cool completely, about 15 minutes. The chocolate will set and the coating will firm up.
- 6 **Devour.** Transfer to a big bowl and serve. Try to share. We believe in you.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	12–16 (about 9 cups)
Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	5 minutes
Total Time	25 minutes (including cooling)
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Snacks

## Tips & Variations

- The Name Debate: East of the Mississippi, it's generally "Puppy Chow." West and South, it's "Muddy Buddies" (which is also the official Chex brand name). In the heart of the Midwest, it's Puppy Chow, and this is a Midwest cookbook, so Puppy Chow it is.
- Peanut-Free: Substitute SunButter (sunflower seed butter) for the peanut butter to make it allergy-friendly. Works perfectly.
- S'mores Version: Add mini marshmallows and crushed graham crackers after the powdered sugar step.
- Cookies & Cream: Use white chocolate chips instead of semi-sweet, skip the peanut butter, and toss with crushed Oreos along with the powdered sugar.
- Birthday Cake: Use white chocolate, add rainbow sprinkles, and use a teaspoon of cake batter extract instead of vanilla.
- Storage: Keeps in an airtight container at room temperature for up to a week — but it has never once lasted that long in any household.
- Pro Tip: Double the batch. Always double the batch.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Puppy Chow's origins are murky, but it emerged from Midwestern kitchens sometime in the 1970s or 1980s, likely as a creative use of the Chex cereal that was already a staple for Chex Mix (another Midwest party legend). The name "Puppy Chow" comes from the finished product's resemblance to Purina Puppy Chow kibble — a comparison that sounds unappetizing until you taste it, at which point you stop caring about the name entirely. Puppy Chow is the universal Midwestern snack: it appears at birthday parties, holiday gatherings, school bake sales, movie nights, road trips, and "just because it's Tuesday." It requires no baking, no special skills, and approximately four minutes to make — which is good, because it takes approximately four minutes to disappear.

\* Photography note: A big red bowl overflowing with powdered-sugar-coated puppy chow, a few pieces spilled onto the table. Maybe a kid's hand reaching for a piece. Bright, cheerful, casual party lighting. Colorful napkins. Fun, approachable, snackable energy.\*

# Drinks



# Homemade Lemonade

*Midwest — The Summer Porch Refresher*

*There's lemonade, and then there's \*real\* lemonade. Freshly squeezed lemons, just enough sweetness, and ice-cold refreshment that makes summer heat bearable. This is the drink of county fairs, backyard barbecues, and lazy afternoons on the porch swing.*

## Ingredients

- The Simple Syrup
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup water
- The Lemonade
- 1½ cups freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 8–10 large lemons)
- 5 cups cold water
- Ice cubes
- For Serving
- Lemon slices
- Fresh mint sprigs
- Additional ice

## Instructions

- 1 **Make the simple syrup.** Combine sugar and 1 cup water in a small saucepan. Heat over medium heat, stirring, until sugar completely dissolves. Do not boil. Remove from heat and let cool for 10 minutes.
- 2 **Juice the lemons.** Roll lemons firmly on the counter with your palm to soften them — this releases more juice. Cut in half and squeeze, straining out seeds and pulp. You need 1½ cups of juice.
- 3 **Combine.** In a large pitcher, combine the simple syrup, fresh lemon juice, and 5 cups cold water. Stir well to mix.
- 4 **Taste and adjust.** This is the crucial step. Taste your lemonade. Too tart? Add more simple syrup (make extra if needed). Too sweet? Add more lemon juice or water. Everyone's sweet-tart balance is different.
- 5 **Chill.** Refrigerate for at least 1 hour until very cold. Lemonade tastes best ice-cold.
- 6 **Serve.** Fill glasses with ice. Pour lemonade over the ice. Garnish with a lemon slice and a sprig of fresh mint.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	15 minutes
Cook Time	5 minutes (for simple syrup)
Total Time	20 minutes + chilling
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Drinks

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Summer porch essential. Bring a pitcher to the neighborhood block party and watch it disappear in minutes.

## Tips & Variations

- Fresh Is Best: Bottled lemon juice cannot compare to freshly squeezed. It's worth the extra effort.
- Meyer Lemonade: Use Meyer lemons for a sweeter, more floral lemonade with less tartness.
- Sparkling Lemonade: Replace half the water with club soda or sparkling water. Add just before serving.
- Strawberry Lemonade: Blend 1 cup fresh strawberries with ½ cup water, strain, and add to the lemonade.
- Lavender Lemonade: Add 2 tablespoons dried culinary lavender to the simple syrup while it's warm. Steep for 10 minutes, then strain.
- Raspberry Lemonade: Muddle 1 cup fresh raspberries in the bottom of the pitcher before adding lemonade.
- Arnold Palmer: Mix half lemonade, half sweet tea for the classic golf course refresher.
- Frozen Lemonade: Blend lemonade with ice for a slushy summer treat.

- Lemon Ice Cubes: Freeze lemonade in ice cube trays so your drink doesn't get diluted.

> Grandma's Secret: \*"Freeze lemon wheels in ice cube trays with a little water — they look beautiful in the pitcher and keep the lemonade cold without watering it down. And make extra simple syrup to keep in the fridge. It lasts for weeks and makes it easy to whip up a fresh batch anytime the grandkids come over."\*

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### **Did You Know?**

> Lemonade has been a summer staple in America since the 1800s, but the Midwest made it an institution. County fairs across Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana became famous for their fresh-squeezed lemonade stands, often using giant wooden presses to juice lemons right in front of customers. The combination of summer heat, hard farm work, and the need for affordable refreshment made lemonade the default drink of the Heartland. Lemonade stands run by children became a rite of passage — teaching entrepreneurship, customer service, and the value of a dollar, one 25-cent cup at a time. Today, the sight of a hand-painted "Lemonade" sign on a card table still evokes pure Americana.

\* Photography note: Tall glass pitcher filled with bright yellow lemonade, condensation on the outside, lemon slices floating inside. Two tall glasses with ice and lemonade beside it, mint sprig garnishes. Bright summer day lighting. White wooden porch railing and Adirondack chair visible in background.\*



## Homemade Root Beer

*Across the Midwest — County Fairs, Farm Kitchens, and Ambitious Backyards*

*Dark, foamy, sassafras-sweet root beer made from scratch with extract, sugar, yeast, and a little patience — fizzy and sharp, with a depth of flavor that makes the commercial stuff taste like it's apologizing. Brewing root beer at home is the Midwestern science experiment that actually tastes good, and the fermenting bottles on the counter make your kitchen feel like a frontier general store.*

## Ingredients

- 1 gallon warm water (not hot — about 100°F)
- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons root beer extract (Zatarain's or McCormick's — available at most grocery stores)
- ¼ teaspoon active dry yeast
- Optional (For Depth)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon wintergreen extract
- You'll Also Need
- 8 clean plastic 16-oz bottles with screw-top caps (plastic is essential — see safety note)
- A funnel
- A large pot or food-safe bucket for mixing

## Instructions

- 1 **Mix the sugar.** In a large pot or food-safe bucket, dissolve the sugar in about 2 cups of warm (not hot!) water, stirring until completely dissolved.
- 2 **Add the extract.** Stir in the root beer extract (and vanilla/wintergreen if using). Add the remaining water and stir to combine. The mixture should be at room temperature — about 75–100°F. If it's too hot, it will kill the yeast. If it's too cold, the yeast won't activate.
- 3 **Add the yeast.** Sprinkle the yeast over the surface of the root beer mixture and stir gently. The yeast is what will create the carbonation — it eats the sugar and produces CO<sub>2</sub> (and a tiny, negligible amount of alcohol).
- 4 **Bottle it.** Using a funnel, pour the mixture into clean plastic bottles, leaving about 2 inches of headspace at the top. Cap tightly.
- 5 **Ferment.** Place the bottles in a warm spot (70–80°F) for 12–48 hours. **\*\*Check them every 12 hours\*\*** by squeezing a bottle. When the bottles are rock-hard and can't be squeezed at all, they're carbonated and ready. This is usually 24–48 hours depending on temperature.
- 6 **Refrigerate immediately.** Once carbonated, move the bottles to the refrigerator immediately. The cold stops the fermentation. **\*\*Do not leave carbonated bottles at room temperature\*\*** — pressure will continue to build and bottles can burst.
- 7 **Serve cold.** Open carefully (they'll be fizzy). Pour into a frosty mug. Add a scoop of vanilla ice cream for a root beer float. Feel like a pioneer.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	About 1 gallon (eight 16-oz bottles)
Prep Time	15 minutes
Ferment Time	12–48 hours
Chill Time	Overnight
Total Time	2 days
Difficulty	Easy (but requires attention)
Category	Drinks

### Midwest Nice Rating:

Bring homemade root beer to a cookout and you'll be the most interesting person there. Kids and adults both lose their minds over this.

## Tips & Variations

- ⚠ SAFETY: Use Plastic Bottles Only. Glass bottles can explode from the CO<sub>2</sub> pressure. This is not a metaphor. Plastic bottles are safer because you can monitor pressure by squeezing them, and they're much less dangerous if they do over-pressurize. Do not use glass unless you have specific brewing experience and pressure-rated bottles.

- Alcohol Content: Technically, the yeast fermentation produces a tiny amount of alcohol — well under 0.5%, which is less than a ripe banana. For all practical purposes, this is non-alcoholic. The fermentation is just for carbonation.

- Dry Ice Method (Instant, No Yeast): For completely non-alcoholic root beer with no waiting, make the sugar-water-extract mixture and add small pieces of food-grade dry ice until fizzy. Handle dry ice with gloves and wait for it to completely sublimate before drinking. This method is great for parties.

- Root Beer Floats: Pour root beer slowly over a scoop of good vanilla ice cream in a tall glass. The foam will rise aggressively — pour slowly and keep going. The ratio is  $\frac{3}{4}$  root beer to  $\frac{1}{4}$  ice cream. Use a straw and a long spoon.

- Sassafras Tea Base: For a from-scratch version (no extract), simmer sassafras root bark, sarsaparilla root, licorice root, wintergreen, and anise in water for 30 minutes, strain, and use this as your base instead of extract plus water. This is the old-timey method and produces a more complex flavor.

> Grandma's Secret: *"A tablespoon of molasses in the mix gives the root beer a deeper, more old-fashioned flavor — darker and richer, like the kind you used to get at the soda fountain. And always serve it in a frosted mug. Put mugs in the freezer an hour before serving."*\*

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### Pairs Well With

A Fourth of July barbecue, a scoop of Blue Bunny vanilla ice cream, your first sip of something you made yourself, and the brief, intoxicating delusion that you might start a root beer business.

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### Did You Know?

> Root beer is one of America's oldest beverages, with roots (literally) going back to colonial times when indigenous peoples brewed teas from sassafras root bark for medicinal purposes. European settlers adapted these into "small beers" — low-alcohol fermented beverages flavored with roots, bark, and herbs. Charles Hires, a Philadelphia pharmacist, popularized a commercial version at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, marketing it as "root tea" (later "root beer") — a temperance-friendly alternative to alcohol. The Midwest became root beer country in the early 20th century, with regional brands like A&W (founded in Lodi, California, but which exploded across the Midwest), Barq's, and IBC becoming fixtures at drive-ins, diners, and county fairs. Homemade root beer was a common farm kitchen project — practically every community cookbook from the 1920s through the 1970s includes a recipe. The tradition faded with cheap commercial soda, but it's experiencing a revival among home brewers and DIY enthusiasts who want that deeper, sharper, more complex root beer flavor that mass production can't quite capture.

\* Photography note: A frosty glass mug of dark, foamy root beer, foam spilling slightly over the rim. Maybe a root beer float version alongside — ice cream bobbing in the dark soda. A checkered tablecloth, a warm summer day suggested by the lighting. A few plastic bottles of homemade root beer in the background. Nostalgic, county-fair energy.\*



# Hot Apple Cider

*Midwest — The Autumn Warmer*

*The smell of fall in a mug. Fresh apple cider simmered with cinnamon sticks, whole cloves, star anise, and orange peel until your entire house smells like an orchard in October. This is the drink that greets you after hayrides, bonfire nights, and crisp football Saturdays.*

## Ingredients

- The Cider
- 2 quarts (8 cups) fresh apple cider (not apple juice)
- ½ cup pure maple syrup (or brown sugar to taste)
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- 1 teaspoon whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon whole allspice berries
- 3 star anise pods
- 1 whole nutmeg, cracked in half
- 1 orange, sliced into rounds
- 1 small apple, sliced (optional)
- 1-inch piece fresh ginger, sliced (optional)
- For Serving
- Extra cinnamon sticks
- Orange peel twists
- Whipped cream (optional)
- Caramel drizzle (optional)
- Splash of bourbon or spiced rum (optional, for adults)

## Instructions

- 1 **Combine everything.** Pour apple cider into a large pot or Dutch oven. Add maple syrup, cinnamon sticks, cloves, allspice, star anise, nutmeg, orange slices, and apple slices and ginger if using.
- 2 **Heat gently.** Bring to a gentle simmer over medium heat. Do not boil — boiling can make the cider taste bitter and will evaporate the delicate apple flavors.
- 3 **Simmer and infuse.** Reduce heat to low and let the cider simmer gently for 25–30 minutes, allowing the spices to fully infuse. The longer it simmers, the more aromatic it becomes.
- 4 **Taste and adjust.** Taste the cider and add more maple syrup if you prefer it sweeter. The sweetness level depends on how sweet your cider was to begin with.
- 5 **Strain and serve.** Using a fine-mesh strainer or slotted spoon, remove the whole spices and fruit slices. Ladle hot cider into mugs.
- 6 **Garnish.** Add a fresh cinnamon stick and an orange peel twist to each mug. For an adults-only version, add a splash of bourbon or spiced rum.

## At A Glance

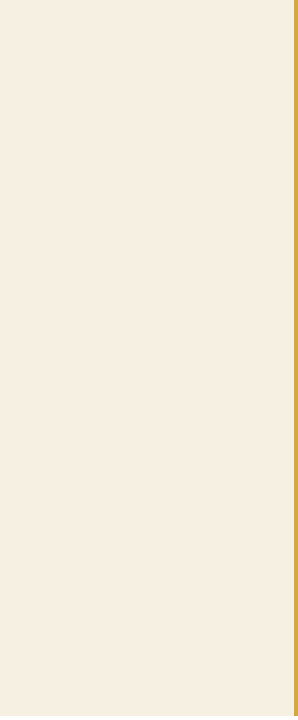
Detail	Info
Servings	8
Prep Time	5 minutes
Cook Time	30 minutes
Total Time	35 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Drinks

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Autumn in a mug. Make a slow cooker full for a gathering and people will never want to leave.

## Tips & Variations

- Cider vs. Juice: Apple cider is unfiltered and has a cloudy appearance with more complex, fresh apple flavor. Apple juice will work but tastes thinner. Seek out fresh cider from orchards or farmers' markets for the best results.
- Slow Cooker Method: Combine all ingredients in a slow cooker and cook on low for 3–4 hours. Keep on warm for serving at parties.
- Spice Bag: Place whole spices in a cheesecloth bundle or large tea infuser for easy removal.
- Cranberry Apple: Add 1 cup cranberry juice for a tart, festive version.
- Caramel Apple: Stir in 3 tablespoons caramel sauce and top each mug with whipped cream and a caramel drizzle.
- Ginger Kick: Add more fresh ginger for a spicier, warming version.
- Keep Warm: Transfer to a thermal carafe or keep on the lowest heat setting for serving throughout an event.



> Grandma's Secret: *"Save your spice bundle after making a batch — it can be reused 2-3 times if you keep it in the fridge. And if you're having people over, start the cider in the slow cooker in the morning on low. By evening, your whole house smells like fall and the cider is perfect. Leftover cider makes the best oatmeal — just use it instead of water."*

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### **Did You Know?**

> Apple cider has been an American tradition since colonial times, when apples were more commonly drunk than eaten. The Midwest's apple-growing regions — Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota — became cider-making capitals, with families visiting orchards each fall for fresh cider and donuts. The tradition of mulling cider with spices came from European wassail traditions and was adopted by German and Scandinavian immigrants who settled the region. Hot apple cider became the signature drink of harvest festivals, Halloween parties, and Thanksgiving gatherings. Today, many Midwestern orchards still press their own cider, and the first sip of hot spiced cider signals that autumn has truly arrived.

\* Photography note: Clear glass mug filled with golden amber hot apple cider, cinnamon stick resting inside, orange slice floating on top. Steam rising visibly. Whole spices (star anise, cinnamon sticks) scattered on wooden surface. Fall leaves and small pumpkins in background. Warm, cozy autumn lighting.\*



## Wisconsin Brandy Old Fashioned

*Wisconsin — Every Supper Club, Bar, and Family Gathering in the State*

*Brandy muddled with a sugar cube, bitters, and a maraschino cherry, topped with a splash of soda (sweet, sour, or press — you must choose), and garnished with enough fruit to qualify as a produce section. This is not the whiskey Old Fashioned the rest of America drinks. This is the Wisconsin Old Fashioned, and in Wisconsin, if you order*

*an Old Fashioned without specifying whiskey, you're getting brandy. Nobody asks. Everybody knows.*

## Ingredients

- 1 sugar cube (or ½ teaspoon granulated sugar)
- 2–3 dashes Angostura bitters
- 1 maraschino cherry (plus more for garnish)
- 1 orange slice
- Splash of water or soda water
- 2 ounces brandy (Korbel is the Wisconsin standard)
- Ice
- Your choice of topper:
- Sweet: Sprite or 7-Up
- Sour: Squirt or Fresca (or sour mix)
- Press: Half Sprite, half soda water
- Garnish (The Wisconsin Way)
- Additional maraschino cherries
- Additional orange slices
- A cocktail pick loaded with fruit
- Optional: a skewered mushroom (yes, really — in some bars)

## Instructions

- 1 **Muddle.** Place the sugar cube in the bottom of an Old Fashioned glass. Add the bitters and a splash of water. Drop in the cherry and orange slice. Muddle firmly — you want to dissolve the sugar and express the oils from the orange, but you're not making a smoothie. The fruit should be bruised, not obliterated.
- 2 **Add ice.** Fill the glass with ice cubes. Some bars use a single large cube; most Wisconsin bars use regular cubes. Both are fine.
- 3 **Add the brandy.** Pour 2 ounces of brandy over the ice. In Wisconsin, this is almost always Korbel. Not because it's the best brandy in the world, but because it's \*the\* brandy. The relationship between Wisconsin and Korbel is deep, loyal, and immune to marketing.
- 4 **Top it off.** Add your chosen topper — sweet, sour, or press. The bartender will ask "sweet, sour, or press?" and you must answer without hesitating. This is a loyalty test.
- 5 **Garnish aggressively.** Add more cherries, another orange slice, and whatever fruit the bar has available. A Wisconsin Old Fashioned should have enough garnish that you could call it a fruit salad with a straight face.
- 6 **Serve.** Stir gently. Sip slowly. Order a second one with dinner. This is the Wisconsin way.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	1 cocktail
Prep Time	5 minutes
Total Time	5 minutes
Difficulty	Easy
Category	Drinks / Cocktails

## Midwest Nice Rating:

This is the state drink of Wisconsin in everything but official designation. It's at every fish fry, every supper club, every wedding, and every Tuesday.

## Tips & Variations

- Sweet vs. Sour vs. Press: "Sweet" (Sprite/7-Up) is the most popular order and gives a sweeter, more approachable drink. "Sour" (Squirt, sour mix, or grapefruit soda) gives a more tart, sophisticated edge. "Press" (half lemon-lime soda, half soda water) is the bartender's choice — balanced and less sweet.

There is no wrong answer, but there are strong opinions.

- The Brandy: Korbel is the traditional Wisconsin choice — it's a California brandy that's smooth, slightly sweet, and mixes perfectly. Wisconsin consumes more Korbel brandy than any other state by a wide margin. Some bars use Christian Brothers. High-end cocktail bars might use a nicer brandy. Your supper club uses Korbel, and your supper club is right.

- The Bitters: Angostura is standard. Some bars use a proprietary bitters blend. If you want to get fancy, try a few dashes of orange bitters alongside the Angostura.

- Whiskey Old Fashioned: If you want bourbon or rye, you need to specify. In Wisconsin, "Old Fashioned" = brandy. In the rest of America, "Old Fashioned" = whiskey. Neither side is wrong. Both sides are confused by the other.

- The Mushroom Garnish: Some bars in central and northern Wisconsin garnish their Old Fashioneds with a pickled mushroom. This is real. It's regional even within Wisconsin. If your bartender offers one, accept it. You're in the presence of tradition.

> Grandma's Secret: \*Use Luxardo cherries instead of the neon-red maraschinos. They cost more but they're actual cherries, and the syrup from the jar can replace the sugar cube. Also, the real secret? Order it press. Sweet is fine, but press is what people who actually know their way around a brandy Old Fashioned drink.\*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A Wisconsin Friday fish fry (mandatory), a supper club with wood paneling and a salad bar, the third quarter of a Packers game, and a designated driver — because these go down dangerously easy and the second one arrives before you remember ordering it.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Wisconsin's relationship with brandy is unique in America and deeply rooted in history. German immigrants — who settled Wisconsin in massive numbers in the mid-1800s — had a tradition of drinking fruit brandies and schnaps. When they arrived in Wisconsin, they adapted their drinking habits to available American spirits, and Korbelt brandy (a California grape brandy) became the standard. By the mid-20th century, the Brandy Old Fashioned had become the signature cocktail of Wisconsin's supper club culture — those uniquely Wisconsin dining establishments where dinner comes with a relish tray, a choice of potato, and a cocktail to start. Wisconsin drinks more brandy per capita than any other state — it's not even close. The state accounts for over 30% of Korbelt's total U.S. sales. In 2020, when supply chains were disrupted and Korbelt became briefly hard to find, Wisconsin experienced something close to a crisis. Bars rationed brandy. Supper clubs improvised. The experience was, for many Wisconsinites, more traumatic than the actual pandemic. The brandy Old Fashioned isn't just Wisconsin's favorite drink. It's Wisconsin's love language.

\* Photography note: A brandy Old Fashioned in a proper Old Fashioned glass — amber liquid over ice, orange slices, cherries, a cocktail pick loaded with fruit. Condensation on the glass. A supper club setting in the background — maybe dim wood paneling, a candle, a relish tray. Warm, amber-toned lighting. The photo should feel like Friday night at 6:30 PM.\*

# **Preserves & Pickles**



# Apple Butter

*Indiana / Ohio Orchard Country — Where Apples Turn to Gold*

*Apple butter is autumn reduced to its essence — apples cooked down until they surrender completely, turning dark and glossy and concentrated, spiced with cinnamon and cloves until your whole house smells like October. It's not butter, and it's not really jam. It's something older, deeper, slower. It's what happens when you take bushels of apples from the orchard and cook them low and long until the sugars caramelize and the fruit transforms into something almost mystical. A spoonful on toast is breakfast. A jar in the pantry is proof you prepared for winter. A batch made with neighbors in a copper kettle outdoors is a vanishing tradition, but one that some communities still keep alive. This is patient cooking. This is apple alchemy.*

## Ingredients

- The Apples
- 4 lbs (about 12 medium) apples — a mix of sweet and tart (Gala + Granny Smith, or Honeycrisp + Jonathan, or whatever the orchard has in abundance)
- 1 cup (240ml) apple cider (not juice — real cider, preferably from the same orchard)
- The Spices & Sweet
- ½ cup (100g) granulated sugar
- ½ cup (100g) packed light brown sugar
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground cloves
- ½ tsp ground nutmeg
- ¼ tsp ground allspice
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tbsp lemon juice (freshly squeezed)

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the apples.** Peel, core, and quarter them. This is the tedious part. Some people use an apple peeler-corer gadget. Those people are smart. Place the apples in a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven (or a 6-quart slow cooker if you're going the modern route).
- 2 **Add everything else.** Pour in the apple cider, both sugars, all the spices, and the salt. Stir to combine. At this point it looks like a lot of apples and not much liquid. Don't worry. Apples release liquid as they cook. Trust the process.
- 3 **Cook (stovetop method).** Bring the mixture to a simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally. Once simmering, reduce heat to low, cover, and cook for 3-4 hours, stirring every 30 minutes. The apples will break down, the liquid will reduce, and your kitchen will smell like a spice shop in heaven.
- 4 **Cook (slow cooker method).** Cover and cook on low for 8-10 hours, or high for 4-5 hours. Stir occasionally. This is the lazy method. It works beautifully. Set it in the morning, let it do its thing all day, come home to apple butter.
- 5 **Mash and blend.** Once the apples are completely soft and broken down, remove from heat. Use a potato masher or immersion blender to puree the mixture to your desired consistency. For ultra-smooth apple butter, push it through a fine-mesh sieve or food mill. For rustic apple butter, just mash it well. Both are correct.
- 6 **Reduce and thicken.** Return the mashed apples to the pot (or keep in slow cooker). Add the lemon juice. Cook uncovered over low heat (or high in the slow cooker with the lid slightly ajar) for another 1-2 hours, stirring frequently. The apple butter will darken as it reduces — this is caramelization, which is flavor. It's done when it's thick enough to mound on a spoon and doesn't weep liquid. The color should be deep amber-brown, almost mahogany.
- 7 **Can or store.** Ladle the hot apple butter into clean, sterilized half-pint jars, leaving ¼ inch headspace. Seal with lids. For shelf-stable storage, process in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes. Otherwise, let cool completely and refrigerate (keeps 3 weeks) or freeze (keeps a year).

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	Yields about 4-5 half-pint jars
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	4-6 hours (stovetop) or 8-10 hours (slow cooker)
Total Time	4.5-10.5 hours (patience included)
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Preserves

### Midwest Nice Rating:

A jar of apple butter says, "I spent the better part of a day making this for you." That's Midwest love language. Expect it wrapped in a cloth napkin with a handwritten tag.

## Tips & Variations

- Apple Varieties: Mix sweet and tart for complexity. Gala, Fuji, and Honeycrisp are sweet. Granny Smith, Jonathan, and Winesap are tart. The best apple butter uses a blend — the tart apples add brightness, the sweet ones add body.
  - Cider vs. Juice: Real apple cider (unfiltered, unpasteurized if you can get it) adds depth. Apple juice is fine but less interesting. Water works in a pinch but sacrifices flavor.
  - Spice Adjustments: Traditional apple butter is heavily spiced. If you want a more apple-forward flavor, cut the spices in half. If you want it to taste like Christmas, add an extra teaspoon of cinnamon and a few whole cloves (remove them before jarring).
  - Molasses Depth: A tablespoon of molasses adds a darker color and a hint of caramel-bitter complexity. Not traditional, but some people swear by it.
  - Sugar Levels: Adjust based on your apples. Honeycrisp needs less sugar. Granny Smith needs more. Taste as you go. The sugar isn't just for sweetness — it helps with preservation and thickening.
  - Outdoor Copper Kettle Method: The traditional way. Build a fire, hang a copper kettle, fill it with apples and cider, and stir for 6-8 hours with a long wooden paddle. The kettle conducts heat evenly, the wood smoke adds a faint complexity, and the whole thing becomes a community event. It's labor-intensive, old-fashioned, and produces apple butter that tastes like history. A few Indiana and Ohio communities still do this in autumn — check historical societies and orchard events.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"Grandma Louise always added a good splash of brandy or applejack — two tablespoons, maybe three if she was feeling generous — during the last hour of simmering. 'It gives it warmth,' she'd say, 'a little extra depth nobody can quite name.' She'd wink when she said it. We all knew. Nobody mentioned it at church. The apple butter always disappeared first at the potluck."\**

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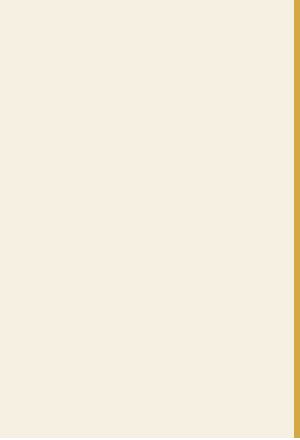
### **Pairs Well With**

Hot biscuits with butter, toast on a cold morning, stirred into oatmeal, spread on cornbread, dolloped on pork chops, gifted to neighbors who helped bring in the apple harvest, and the satisfaction of a pantry shelf lined with jars of something you made with your own hands from fruit that grew a few miles away.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Apple butter has roots in medieval Europe, but in the American Midwest — particularly Indiana and Ohio — it became something more than a preserve. It became a social event. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, apple butter making was often a communal affair called an "apple butter boil" or "apple butter bee." Families and neighbors would gather in the fall after the apple harvest, build a fire in an open field or farmyard, hang a massive copper kettle (some held 30-50 gallons), and take turns stirring apples for hours. It was an all-day event, sometimes stretching into the evening. Someone always brought cider (both kinds). Someone always brought food. Kids ran around. Adults gossiped and told stories. And everyone took turns with the long wooden stirring paddle, because if you stopped stirring, the apples would scorch. The copper kettles were prized possessions, often passed down through generations — copper conducts heat evenly and doesn't react with the fruit's acidity. The slow outdoor cooking over wood fire gave the apple butter a faint smokiness and a deep, dark color that modern stovetop versions can't quite replicate. By mid-century, as farms consolidated and communities dispersed, the tradition faded. Copper kettles ended up in antique shops. Apple butter moved indoors, made in small batches on stovetops or slow cookers. But the tradition never completely died. In parts of Indiana and Ohio, historical societies, museums, and a few stubborn orchard communities still hold annual apple butter boils — Roscoe Village in Coshocton, Ohio; various Amish and Mennonite communities; a handful of historical farms and living history sites. If you've never tasted apple butter made outdoors in a copper kettle over wood fire, stirred by a dozen hands over six hours, you've never



tasted *\*real\** apple butter. It's darker, richer, more complex — the slow caramelization and the wood smoke and the patient stirring all contribute something electric stoves can't replicate. But even the stovetop version carries the echo of those traditions. When you make apple butter, you're making something slow, patient, generous — something meant to be shared, stored, and savored through winter. That's the Midwest way. Apples don't keep forever. But apple butter does.

\* Photography note: Mason jars of dark, glossy apple butter on a weathered wooden table, one jar open with a spoon resting in it, a smear of apple butter on the spoon catching the light. Fresh apples scattered around — a mix of red and green varieties, some with stems and leaves. Cinnamon sticks. Autumn light, golden and slanting. The photo should feel like late afternoon in October, harvest season, wood smoke in the air, the smell of apples and spices. Not too styled. This is real food, made in a real kitchen, from real apples.\*



## Corn Relish

*Midwest — The Sunshine in a Jar*

*Summer captured at its peak. Sweet corn kernels, crisp peppers, and onion preserved in a tangy, slightly sweet brine that brightens any meal. This colorful relish transforms humble hot dogs, elevates grilled meats, and makes sandwiches sing. It tastes like August even in the dead of February.*

## Ingredients

- The Vegetables
- 8 cups fresh corn kernels (about 12 ears, or 4 lbs frozen corn, thawed)
- 1 cup red bell pepper, finely diced
- 1 cup green bell pepper, finely diced
- 1 cup yellow onion, finely diced
- 1 cup celery, finely diced
- 1 jalapeño, seeded and minced (optional)
- The Brine
- 2 cups apple cider vinegar
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons fine sea salt
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard seeds
- 1 teaspoon celery seeds
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon dry mustard powder
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

## Instructions

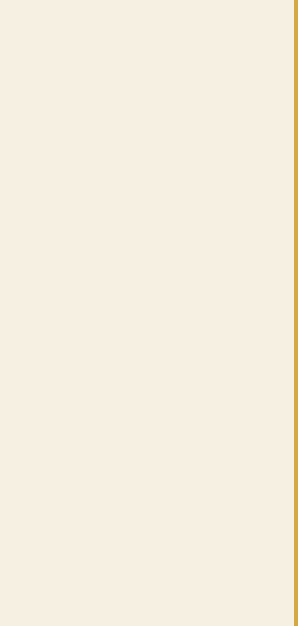
- 1 **Prep the corn.** If using fresh corn, shuck ears and remove silk. Stand each ear upright in a large bowl and slice kernels off the cob with a sharp knife. Measure 8 cups.
- 2 **Make the brine.** In a large pot or Dutch oven, combine vinegar, water, sugar, and salt. Add mustard seeds, celery seeds, turmeric, dry mustard, and black pepper. Bring to a boil over high heat, stirring to dissolve sugar and salt.
- 3 **Add the vegetables.** Add corn, red and green peppers, onion, celery, and jalapeño (if using) to the brine. Return to a boil, stirring occasionally.
- 4 **Simmer.** Reduce heat to medium and simmer for 15–20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are tender but still have some crunch. The mixture will thicken slightly.
- 5 **Pack the jars.** Sterilize six pint jars. Using a slotted spoon, pack the vegetable mixture into hot jars, leaving ½ inch headspace. Ladle hot brine over the vegetables to fill any gaps, maintaining ½ inch headspace.
- 6 **Remove air bubbles.** Run a clean knife around the inside of each jar to release trapped air. Wipe rims clean with a damp cloth.
- 7 **Seal.** Place lids on jars and screw on bands until fingertip-tight.
- 8 **Refrigerator method.** Let cool to room temperature, then refrigerate. Allow at least 24 hours for flavors to meld. Refrigerator corn relish keeps for up to 2 months.
- 9 **For canning (shelf-stable).** Process filled jars in a boiling water bath for 15 minutes. Remove and let cool undisturbed for 12–24 hours. Check seals before storing.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	6 pint jars
Prep Time	30 minutes
Cook Time	25 minutes
Total Time	55 minutes + cooling
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Preserves

## Tips & Variations

- Fresh vs. Frozen: Fresh corn at peak season is unbeatable, but frozen corn works well in winter. Thaw and drain thoroughly.
- Color Variety: Use a mix of red, orange, and yellow peppers for maximum visual appeal.
- Spicier Version: Keep the jalapeño seeds, or add a habanero for serious heat.
- Tangy-Sweet Balance: Taste the brine before adding vegetables. Adjust sugar and vinegar to your preference.
- Serving Ideas: Top hot dogs and burgers, serve with grilled chicken, mix into potato salad, or spoon over cream cheese with crackers.

- 
- Southwestern Corn Relish: Add 1 can black beans (drained), 1 teaspoon cumin, and fresh cilantro for a Tex-Mex version.
  - Smaller Batch: Cut the recipe in half for 3 pint jars.
- 

### **Did You Know?**

> Corn relish is quintessentially Midwestern — born from the region's endless corn fields and the need to preserve summer's bounty. Before home refrigeration, farm families relied on pickling and canning to get through winter, and corn relish was a prized way to capture the flavor of August corn. The Pennsylvania Dutch brought similar relishes to the Midwest, where they merged with German and Scandinavian pickling traditions. County fair canning competitions still award blue ribbons for the best corn relish, and winning recipes are guarded family secrets. A jar of homemade corn relish remains the perfect hostess gift — a little jar of sunshine to brighten someone's day.

\* Photography note: Wide-mouth mason jar filled with golden corn relish, red and green pepper pieces visible throughout. Jar is open with a small wooden spoon inside. Hot dog dressed with corn relish on a plate beside the jar. Checkered cloth napkin. Bright, cheerful summer lighting.\*



## Fresh Giardiniera (Chicago-Style Hot)

*Chicago, Illinois — Taylor Street to Every Italian Beef Stand in the City*

*A riotous jar of fire-pickled vegetables — serrano peppers, celery, cauliflower, carrots, olives — swimming in a spiced oil brine that burns just right. This is the condiment that turns a good Italian beef into a religious experience. Chicagoans don't ask *\*if\** you want giardiniera. They ask *\*how much.\***

## Ingredients

- The Vegetables
- 4 stalks celery, diced (¼-inch pieces)
- 2 medium carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 small head cauliflower, cut into small florets then roughly chopped
- 10–12 serrano peppers, stems removed, finely chopped (leave seeds in for heat)
- 4 jalapeño peppers, finely chopped
- 1 cup green olives with pimentos, roughly chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 small white onion, diced
- The Brine (Day 1)
- ¼ cup kosher salt
- 4 cups cold water
- The Oil Mixture (Day 2)
- 2 cups extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup canola or vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon celery seed

## Instructions

- 1 **Chop everything.** Dice all the vegetables into pieces roughly the size of your pinky fingernail — uniform enough that they'll pack into jars, rough enough that they've got character. This is Chicago, not a French kitchen. Combine all the vegetables in a very large bowl.
- 2 **Salt brine.** Dissolve the kosher salt in the cold water. Pour the brine over the vegetable mixture. The vegetables should be mostly submerged — add a bit more salted water if needed. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight (at least 8 hours, up to 16).
- 3 **Drain thoroughly.** The next day, drain the vegetables in a large colander. Let them sit for 15–20 minutes, tossing occasionally. You want them well-drained — excess water will make your giardiniera soggy, and soggy giardiniera is a sin on Taylor Street.
- 4 **Mix the oil.** In a large bowl, whisk together the olive oil, canola oil, oregano, red pepper flakes, black pepper, and celery seed.
- 5 **Combine.** Add the drained vegetables to the seasoned oil mixture. Stir thoroughly, making sure every piece is coated and the spices are distributed.
- 6 **Jar it up.** Pack the giardiniera into clean pint jars (or one big jar), making sure the oil covers the vegetables completely. If you're short on oil, top off with more olive oil.
- 7 **Wait.** Refrigerate for at least 2 days before eating. Three days is better. A week is phenomenal. The flavors need time to meld — the heat softens slightly, the oregano blooms, the garlic permeates everything.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	About 6 pint jars
Prep Time	45 minutes
Brine Time	Overnight + 2–3 days marinating
Total Time	3–4 days (mostly waiting)
Difficulty	Moderate
Category	Preserves / Condiments

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Bring a jar of homemade giardiniera to any gathering and you'll be invited back for life. This is top-tier potluck currency.

## Tips & Variations

- Heat Control: For milder giardiniera, seed the serrano peppers before chopping. For "my eyes are watering and I love it" heat, add a couple of habaneros. For authentic Chicago heat, leave the serranos seeded and don't be a coward.
- Sport Peppers: Some old-school recipes include Chicago sport peppers. If you can find them, throw in a dozen, chopped.

- Fine vs. Chunky: Classic Chicago Italian beef joints use finely chopped ("hot mix"). For a more relish-tray style, leave the pieces slightly larger. Both are correct.
- Shelf Life: Stored in the fridge with oil covering the vegetables, giardiniera keeps for 3–4 weeks easily. It gets better every day.
- The Italian Beef Connection: Pile this on a proper Italian beef sandwich with sweet peppers, dip the whole thing in jus, and you've just unlocked Chicago's greatest contribution to American cuisine. (Sorry, deep dish — you're number two.)
- Other Uses: Giardiniera on scrambled eggs. On pizza. On a grilled bratwurst. Stirred into pasta salad. Mixed into cream cheese for a dip. There is almost nothing it doesn't improve.
- > Grandma's Secret: *"Add a few tablespoons of the brine from a jar of sport peppers to the oil mixture. Nobody will know why yours tastes more authentic. Also, let the jar sit upside-down for a few hours, then right-side up — it keeps the oil distributed."*

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### **Pairs Well With**

A dripping Italian beef sandwich from a stand with no seats, the L train rattling overhead, and a complete inability to keep this off your shirt.

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### **Did You Know?**

> Giardiniera (jar-din-AIR-ah) comes from the Italian word *\*giardino\** — garden — and refers to the garden vegetables in the mix. But what Chicagoans did to this Italian pickled vegetable tradition would make a Neapolitan grandmother weep with confusion. Italian giardiniera is a vinegar-brined, mild, almost salad-like preparation. Chicago giardiniera is an oil-packed, blisteringly hot, oregano-punched condiment that has more in common with a dare than a salad. It was born in the Italian-American neighborhoods of Chicago's Near West Side, where immigrant families adapted Old World preserving techniques to New World peppers. By the mid-20th century, giardiniera was inseparable from the Chicago Italian beef sandwich — together they form one of America's most underrated regional food pairings. Every Italian deli, beef stand, and corner store in Chicago carries their own version. Families guard their recipes. Arguments about whose is best have ended friendships. This recipe won't end any friendships, but it might start a few.

\* Photography note: A wide-mouth mason jar packed with colorful chopped giardiniera — the greens of celery and peppers, orange carrots, white cauliflower, all glistening in golden-green oil. Some spilled onto a wooden cutting board next to an Italian beef sandwich with the giardiniera piled high. Harsh, honest deli lighting. Maybe a red-checked paper liner. Chicago, baby.\*



## Homemade Dill Pickles

*Across the Midwest — Garden Season, Canning Season, Pickle Season*

*Crisp, cold, garlic-punched, dill-fragrant pickles made in your own kitchen with cucumbers that were in the garden this morning. The brine is sharp, the crunch is audible, and the satisfaction of a shelf lined with jars of homemade pickles is the kind of quiet pride that doesn't need a social media post. (You're going to post it anyway.)*

## Ingredients

- The Pickles
- 3–4 pounds pickling cucumbers (Kirby or similar — small, firm, unwaxed)
- 6–12 heads fresh dill (or 6 tablespoons dried dill seed)
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled and halved
- 1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns
- 2 teaspoons mustard seed
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional — for a little kick)
- 6 fresh grape leaves or oak leaves (optional — keeps pickles crisp)
- The Brine
- 3 cups white distilled vinegar (5% acidity)
- 3 cups water
- 3 tablespoons pickling salt (not iodized table salt — it clouds the brine)

## Instructions

- 1 Prep the cucumbers.** Wash the cucumbers thoroughly. Trim off  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch from the blossom end (the end opposite the stem) — there's an enzyme there that can make pickles soft. Leave them whole for classic dills, or slice into spears or chips. Pack them tightly — pickles that float in the brine don't cure evenly.
- 2 Prep the jars.** Wash 6 pint jars, lids, and bands in hot soapy water. Keep the jars warm (in a 200°F oven, or in simmering water) until ready to fill.
- 3 Season the jars.** Into each warm jar, place: 1–2 heads of fresh dill (or 1 tablespoon dill seed), 2 garlic clove halves,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon peppercorns,  $\frac{1}{3}$  teaspoon mustard seed, a pinch of red pepper flakes, and a grape leaf if using.
- 4 Pack the cucumbers.** Pack the cucumbers tightly into the jars, standing them upright. Pack them in snugly — they'll shrink slightly during processing. Leave  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of headspace from the top of the jar.
- 5 Make the brine.** In a saucepan, bring the vinegar, water, and pickling salt to a boil, stirring until the salt is dissolved.
- 6 Fill the jars.** Pour the hot brine over the cucumbers in each jar, maintaining  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of headspace. Use a butter knife or chopstick to remove any air bubbles by running it along the inside edge of the jar. Wipe the jar rims clean with a damp cloth. Place lids and bands, tightening to fingertip-tight.
- 7 Process (for shelf-stable pickles).** Place the jars in a boiling water bath canner. Process pint jars for 15 minutes (start timing when the water returns to a full boil). Remove and let cool on a towel. You'll hear the lids pop and seal — that's the sound of success.
- 8 Wait.** This is the hard part. The pickles need at least 2 weeks — preferably 4 — for the flavors to fully develop. The garlic mellows, the dill permeates, the brine equalizes. Patience makes perfect pickles.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Yield	About 6 pint jars
Prep Time	30 minutes
Processing Time	15 minutes (for canning)
Wait Time	2–4 weeks for full flavor
Total Time	1 hour active + 2 weeks waiting
Difficulty	Moderate
Category	Preserves

### Midwest Nice Rating:

A jar of homemade pickles is the Midwest's version of a business card. Hand one to a neighbor and you've just signed a mutual aid treaty.

### Tips & Variations

- Refrigerator Pickles (No Canning): Skip the boiling water bath. Pack jars, pour hot brine, let cool, and refrigerate. They'll be ready in 3–5 days and keep in the fridge for 2–3 months. No canning equipment needed. This is the beginner-friendly method.

- Cucumber Choice: Pickling cucumbers (Kirbys, National Pickling, Homemade Pickles variety) are essential. Regular slicing cucumbers from the store are too watery and will make mushy pickles. Farmers' markets in July and August are your best source.
  - Grape Leaves: Grape leaves contain tannins that help keep pickles crisp. Oak leaves work too. If you can't find either, adding ½ teaspoon of calcium chloride (Pickle Crisp) per jar does the same thing.
  - Spicy Dill Pickles: Add a whole dried chile (cayenne or árbol) to each jar. Or double the red pepper flakes.
  - Bread and Butter Pickles: For a sweeter pickle, use a brine of equal parts vinegar and sugar, with turmeric, celery seed, and sliced onions. Completely different animal, equally beloved.
  - Pickle Salt Matters: Pickling salt is pure sodium chloride with no additives. Iodized table salt makes the brine cloudy. Kosher salt works but measure by weight, not volume, since the flake size differs.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"A tiny pinch of alum in each jar — it keeps them extra crunchy. Some people say it's unnecessary with modern methods. Some people also have soft pickles. And always make the brine fresh — don't reuse brine from an old batch. The acidity changes, and you'll end up with mush."\*

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### Pairs Well With

A summer garden that produced more cucumbers than any reasonable family could eat, a Saturday spent in the kitchen with the windows open, and the deep satisfaction of opening a jar in January and tasting August.

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### Did You Know?

> Home canning and pickling in the Midwest isn't just a hobby — it's a living tradition with roots in both immigrant preserving cultures and frontier necessity. German, Polish, Czech, and Scandinavian immigrants all brought their own pickling traditions to the region, and the vast cucumber harvests of the Midwest's fertile gardens provided endless raw material. At its peak in the mid-20th century, home canning was so widespread that Ball jars were practically a Midwestern unit of currency. The tradition declined with the rise of supermarkets and year-round produce availability, but it never died — and it's experienced a significant revival in the 2010s and 2020s, driven by farm-to-table culture, sustainability movements, and the simple fact that homemade pickles taste dramatically better than store-bought ones. The county fair pickle competition remains one of the most fiercely contested categories at Midwestern fairs. Judges evaluate crunch, brine clarity, spice balance, and visual appeal. Ribbons are displayed with genuine pride. Wars have been fought over less.

\* Photography note: A row of mason jars filled with pickles — some whole, some spears, the green of the cucumbers and the sprigs of dill visible through the glass, brine slightly hazy with garlic and spices. A few fresh cucumbers and dill heads on the counter alongside. Bright, clean kitchen light. The photo should feel like August in the Midwest — garden abundance, canning jars, summer at its peak.\*



## Pickled Beets

*German, Polish, Scandinavian Midwest — Root Cellars and Holiday Tables*

*Deep ruby red, sweet-tart, spice-scented, and jewel-bright in their jars — pickled beets are what happens when you take one of the earth's most stubbornly red vegetables and transform it into something that belongs on a holiday table. They stain everything they touch (your hands, your cutting board, your conscience if you skip making them). They're earthy and sweet and vinegary all at once. They're the vegetable equivalent of a Midwest grandma who wears lipstick to church and speaks her mind at town council meetings: unignorable, unapologetic, and entirely themselves. A jar of pickled beets in the pantry means winter is handled. A jar of pickled beets at Easter dinner means someone knows what they're doing. And a forkful of pickled beets next to ham and mashed potatoes means you understand that*

*sometimes the best things are the things that have been waiting in the dark, getting better with time.*

## Ingredients

- The Beets
- 3 pounds fresh beets (about 8 medium), greens trimmed to 1 inch
- Water for boiling
- The Pickling Liquid
- 2 cups apple cider vinegar (the good stuff — it matters)
- 1 cup water
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 teaspoon whole black peppercorns
- 1 teaspoon whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon whole allspice berries
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 medium onion, thinly sliced (optional, but adds complexity)

## Instructions

- 1 Cook the beets.** Place whole, unpeeled beets in a large pot. Cover with cold water by 2 inches. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cook for 35-45 minutes, until a knife slides easily into the center. The cooking time depends on size — small beets cook faster, baseball-sized beets take longer. Drain and let cool until you can handle them without swearing.
- 2 Peel and slice.** Under cool running water, slip the skins off the beets. They should slide right off like magic. If they don't slide easily, the beets aren't cooked enough. Trim the tops and bottoms. Slice into ¼-inch rounds, or cut into wedges or cubes — whatever shape makes you happy. Wear gloves or embrace the pink hands. Your call.
- 3 Make the brine.** While the beets cook, combine vinegar, water, sugar, and salt in a medium saucepan. Add the peppercorns, cloves, allspice, cinnamon sticks, and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes to let the spices bloom. Your kitchen will smell like Christmas and autumn had a baby.
- 4 Pack the jars.** Sterilize four pint jars (boil them, run them through the dishwasher, or keep them in a 200°F oven until ready). Pack the sliced beets tightly into the jars, layering in the sliced onion if you're using it. Leave ½ inch headspace at the top.
- 5 Fill with brine.** Ladle the hot brine over the beets, distributing the whole spices evenly among the jars. Make sure the beets are fully submerged — any exposed beet will darken and dry out. Leave ½ inch headspace.
- 6 Remove air bubbles.** Run a clean knife or chopstick around the inside edge of each jar to release trapped air bubbles. They hide in there. Find them. Wipe the jar rims clean with a damp cloth — any beet residue will prevent a good seal.
- 7 Seal.** Place lids on jars and screw on bands until fingertip-tight. Don't overtighten — air needs to escape during processing.
- 8 Refrigerator method (easier).** Let the jars cool to room temperature, then refrigerate. Allow at least 48 hours for the flavors to develop — the longer they sit, the better they get. Refrigerator pickled beets keep for up to 3 months.
- 9 Canning method (shelf-stable).** Process the filled jars in a boiling water bath for 30 minutes (start timing when the water returns to a full boil). Remove carefully and let cool undisturbed for 12-24 hours. Check seals — the lids should be concave and shouldn't flex when pressed. Store in a cool, dark place for up to a year. Wait at least 2 weeks before opening to let the flavors marry.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	4 pint jars
Prep Time	30 minutes (and possibly stained hands)
Cook Time	45 minutes
Total Time	1 hour 15 minutes + cooling + 2 weeks patience
Difficulty	Medium
Category	Preserves

## Midwest Nice Rating:

Pickled beets at a church potluck or holiday meal are a sign of serious cooking credentials. Bringing store-bought is noticed. Bringing homemade is respected. Bringing homemade with the right spice balance is remembered.

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### Tips & Variations

- Choosing Beets: Select firm, smooth beets of similar size for even cooking. Small to medium beets (2-3 inches diameter) are more tender than the massive ones. Look for beets with fresh greens still attached — that's a sign of freshness. Save the greens and sauté them. Waste not.
  - Wear Gloves: Beet juice stains everything. Your hands, your cutting board, your countertop, your dish towel, your soul. Rubber gloves are your friend. Or embrace the pink hands for a few days. It'll fade. Eventually.
  - Color Varieties: Golden beets and Chioggia (candy-stripe) beets make beautiful pickles with a milder flavor and zero staining. But they're not \*pickled beets\* in the traditional sense. Red is the standard. Red is the expectation. Red is what grandma made.
  - Don't Mix Colors: If you pickle golden and red beets together, the red will bleed into the golden and you'll end up with a jar of sad pink beets. Keep them separate.
  - Honey Sweetened: Replace half the sugar with honey for a rounder, more complex sweetness. Some families swear by it. It's not traditional, but it's good.
  - Horseradish Kick: Add 2 tablespoons prepared horseradish to the brine for a German-style pickled beet with bite. Excellent with pot roast.
  - Quick Pickle Method: In a hurry? Slice raw beets paper-thin on a mandoline, pack into jars, pour hot brine over, and refrigerate. They'll be ready to eat in 2 hours. They won't have the same tender texture as cooked beets, but they'll be crunchy, bright, and good.
  - Pickled Beet Eggs: After you've eaten the beets, add peeled hard-boiled eggs to the jar. They'll turn a shocking magenta in 2-3 days and taste like a diner in 1965. It's a Pennsylvania Dutch tradition that traveled west. Bar food in certain parts of Ohio. Don't knock it until you've tried it.
- > Grandma's Secret: \*"Grandma Elsa always added a whole star anise to each jar — 'for depth,' she'd say. And she'd save the beet-pickling brine after the beets were gone. 'Liquid gold,' she called it. She'd use it in potato salad dressing, drizzle it on roasted vegetables, mix it into vinaigrettes. Nothing wasted. And she always made sure the beets sat for at least three weeks before opening the first jar. 'Patience makes perfect pickles,' she'd say. She was right. She usually was."\*

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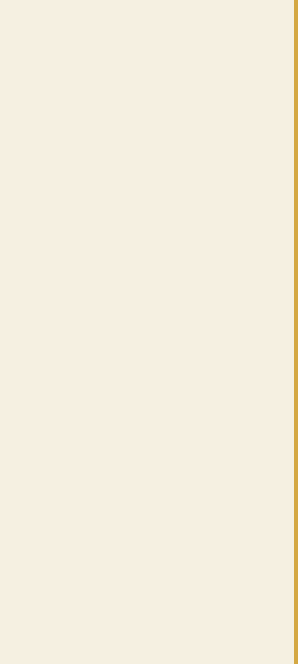
### Pairs Well With

Easter ham, Christmas ham, any ham really, mashed potatoes and gravy, pot roast, Swedish meatballs, winter salads, rye bread and butter, and the pride of opening a pantry and seeing jars lined up like rubies, proof that summer's harvest is still feeding you in February.

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### Did You Know?

> Pickled beets are one of those foods that reveal the deep immigrant roots of Midwestern foodways. German settlers brought their \*Rote Bete\* (red beets) traditions. Polish families made \*ćwikła\* (beet relish). Scandinavian immigrants knew pickled beets as \*inlagda rödbetor\*, a standard accompaniment to herring and potatoes. These traditions collided and merged in the Midwest, creating a hybrid pickled beet culture that's distinctly American but deeply European in its DNA. Before refrigeration, root cellars were the only way to keep food through harsh Midwestern winters, and beets — hardy, nutritious, and able to store for months — were a root cellar staple. Pickling them extended their life



even further and added the vinegar tang that brightened heavy winter meals. By the mid-20th century, pickled beets had become a permanent fixture at Midwest holiday tables, particularly Easter and Christmas. The deep red color added visual drama to the spread, the sweet-sour-spice flavor balanced rich meats, and the cultural association with "real cooking" made them a point of pride. Canned pickled beets (the Harvard Beets style) became grocery store standards, but homemade remained the gold standard. There's a reason: homemade pickled beets have complexity and balance that mass-produced versions can't replicate. The spices are whole, not ground. The sugar level is adjustable. The texture is tender but not mushy. And the deep, dark, glossy red that comes from slow cooking and proper brining is something you can't get from a can. In German and Polish communities across the Midwest, pickled beet recipes are still passed down on stained index cards, written in grandma's handwriting, with notes like "not too much clove" or "Ma always used honey" in the margins. These aren't just recipes. They're heirlooms. They're proof that your people knew how to turn a root vegetable into something beautiful, something that lasts, something worth keeping in the dark and bringing out when it matters.

\* Photography note: Pint jars of deep ruby pickled beets, one jar open with beet slices visible, the brine catching the light like garnet. Cinnamon sticks and whole spices scattered around. A small plate with a few beet slices and a fork — maybe a smear of beet juice on the plate. Rustic wooden table, worn and real. Late afternoon light, warm and golden. The photo should feel like a farmhouse pantry, a holiday table, a kitchen where someone's grandmother actually cooked. Not magazine-perfect. Real.\*



## Strawberry Freezer Jam

*Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois Berry Country — U-Pick Farms, June Mornings, Summer in a Jar*

*June in the Midwest means one thing: strawberry season. And strawberry season means waking up early, driving out to a U-pick farm with empty flats and high hopes, kneeling in the rows until your knees are stained and your fingers are red, and coming home with more berries than any reasonable person needs. Freezer jam is what happens next — bright, fresh, almost obscenely red, tasting more like actual strawberries than any cooked jam ever could. It's summer captured without heat, berries preserved at their peak, the kind of jam that makes store-bought taste like a*

*polite suggestion of fruit. You make it in twenty minutes, you freeze it, and six months later you open a jar in the dead of January and it tastes like hope.*

## Ingredients

- The Berries
- 2 lbs (about 6 cups) fresh ripe strawberries, hulled and crushed
- 4 cups (800g) granulated sugar
- 1 (1.75 oz / 49g) package powdered fruit pectin (Sure-Jell for Less Sugar, or regular pectin for sweeter jam)
- ¾ cup (180ml) water

## Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the strawberries.** Wash and hull the berries. Crush them thoroughly with a potato masher — you want crushed, not pureed. Leave some texture. Some people use a food processor. Those people are wrong. A potato masher gives you the perfect consistency: broken-down but still recognizable as actual fruit. Measure exactly 4 cups of crushed strawberries into a large bowl.
- 2 **Combine with sugar.** Add all the sugar to the crushed berries. Stir for 3 minutes — set a timer, because your arm will get tired and you'll want to stop early. Keep stirring. The sugar needs to dissolve. Let the mixture stand for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. This is called maceration. The sugar pulls out the berry juice and the whole thing becomes glossy and gorgeous.
- 3 **Prepare the pectin solution.** In a small saucepan, combine the powdered pectin and ¾ cup water. Bring to a full rolling boil over high heat, stirring constantly. Boil for exactly 1 minute. This activates the pectin, which is what makes jam set without cooking the fruit.
- 4 **Combine pectin with strawberries.** Pour the hot pectin solution into the strawberry-sugar mixture immediately. Stir constantly for 3 minutes. Your kitchen will smell like a strawberry field at noon. A few undissolved sugar crystals are fine — they'll dissolve as the jam sits.
- 5 **Fill the jars.** Ladle the jam into clean freezer-safe jars or plastic containers, leaving ½ inch headspace at the top (the jam will expand slightly when frozen). Half-pint jars are ideal — that's a breakfast's worth of jam.
- 6 **Set and store.** Cover the jars tightly. Let them stand at room temperature for 24 hours to set — the pectin needs time to work its magic. After 24 hours, refrigerate any jars you'll use within 3 weeks. Freeze the rest for up to a year. When you need one, thaw it in the fridge overnight. The color stays brilliant, the flavor stays fresh, and the texture stays just right.

## At A Glance

Detail	Info
Servings	Yields about 6-8 half-pint jars
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	0 minutes (that's the point)
Total Time	20 minutes (plus 24 hours to set)
Difficulty	Easy (perfect for first-time preservers)
Category	Preserves

### Midwest Nice Rating:

Making extra batches of freezer jam is the Midwestern equivalent of minting your own social currency. Hostess gifts, teacher gifts, neighbor gifts, church bazaar contributions — a jar of homemade freezer jam says "I woke up at dawn, picked berries with dirt under my nails, and thought of you."

## Tips & Variations

- Strawberry Selection: For freezer jam, peak ripeness is everything. Underripe berries lack flavor. Overripe berries get mushy. You want berries that are deep red all the way through, fragrant, and just firm enough to hold their shape. Local U-pick farms (Michigan's strawberry belt, Wisconsin's berry

farms, Illinois fruit country) harvest at peak ripeness because they don't ship — that's why they make the best jam.

- Variety Matters: Honeoye, Jewel, and Allstar are classic Midwestern strawberry varieties — intensely flavored, sweet-tart balanced, perfect for preserving. Chandler and Seascape (California varieties) are bigger and prettier but less flavorful. Ask the farm which varieties they're growing.

- Texture Control: Crush lightly for chunky jam, crush thoroughly for spreadable jam. Don't puree — you want pieces of berry, not strawberry soup.

- Low-Sugar Option: Use pectin specifically labeled "for less or no sugar" and reduce sugar to 2 cups. The jam will be less sweet, more intensely berry-flavored, and slightly softer-set. Some people prefer it. Some people are also wrong, but that's their choice.

- Lemon Juice: A teaspoon of fresh lemon juice brightens the berry flavor and adds a tiny bit of acidity. Grandma Peggy used balsamic vinegar instead (see below). Both work.

- Gift-Giving Tip: Freezer jam makes excellent gifts, but tell recipients to keep it in the freezer. A jar left out on a counter will mold. Write "KEEP FROZEN" on the lid in Sharpie. People will still forget. That's humanity.

- Peak Season: Late May through mid-June is prime strawberry season in the northern Midwest (Michigan, Wisconsin). Illinois and southern regions harvest slightly earlier. If you miss it, you miss it — strawberries don't wait.

> Grandma's Secret: "Grandma Peggy always added a quarter teaspoon of balsamic vinegar to her crushed strawberries. 'It brightens the berry flavor,' she'd say, 'makes it taste extra special.' Nobody ever guessed the secret. They'd just say, 'Peggy, this tastes like\* real \*strawberries,' and she'd smile and say, 'That's because it is.' She wasn't wrong, but she wasn't telling the whole truth either."\*

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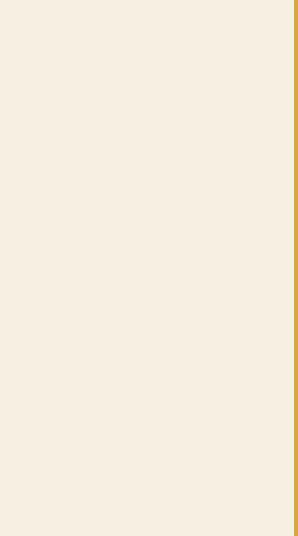
### Pairs Well With

Buttermilk biscuits still warm from the oven, toast with good butter, vanilla ice cream on a summer evening, and the memory of kneeling in a strawberry row at dawn with the dew soaking through your jeans and the sun just coming up over the field.

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### Did You Know?

> Freezer jam is a relatively modern invention — it became popular in the 1950s and 1960s when home freezers became common appliances and commercial pectin manufacturers (like Ball and Sure-Jell) started marketing "freezer pectin" specifically designed to set jam without cooking. For Midwestern home preservers, it was a revelation. Traditional cooked jam requires careful temperature monitoring, boiling water baths, sterilized equipment, and the risk of burnt batches or failed seals. Freezer jam requires a bowl, a masher, and twenty minutes. It democratized jam-making. Suddenly, anyone could preserve strawberries without canning expertise or equipment. It became particularly popular for strawberries because strawberries lose their fresh flavor when cooked — the bright, floral notes that make a perfectly ripe berry so incredible evaporate in heat. Freezer jam preserves those notes almost perfectly. By the 1970s and 1980s, freezer jam had become the standard strawberry preserving method across the Midwest, particularly in rural and small-town communities where U-pick farms were abundant and strawberry season was a major social event. Families would spend a June Saturday picking berries together, then spend the afternoon making jam together — kids crushing berries, parents managing the pectin, grandparents supervising and quality-testing (i.e., eating spoonfuls directly from the bowl). The jars would go into chest freezers in basements and garages, a stockpile of summer. Freezer jam also became the default gift for church bazaars, craft fairs, teacher appreciation, and hostess gifts — it was homemade, it was special, and it was achievable. You didn't need to be an expert



canner. You just needed berries, sugar, pectin, and a little bit of effort. In recent years, as farmers' markets and U-pick farms have experienced a resurgence, so has freezer jam. The Instagram generation has discovered what Midwestern grandmothers knew all along: homemade jam made from fresh-picked berries tastes infinitely better than anything you can buy. And unlike the complicated, equipment-intensive canning methods that can intimidate beginners, freezer jam is approachable. It's the gateway drug to home preserving. First you make freezer jam. Then you're planting a garden, buying a pressure canner, and comparing pickle recipes with strangers at the farmers' market. It's a slippery slope, and it starts with strawberries.

\* Photography note: Half-pint mason jars of brilliant red freezer jam, lids off, some with spoons resting in them. Fresh strawberries scattered around — some whole, some halved to show the red interior, a few with stems and leaves still attached. Morning light through a kitchen window, the kind of light that makes red things glow. One jar is open with jam on a piece of toast on a plate beside it. The photo should feel like June — bright, fresh, optimistic, the promise of summer mornings. Not styled to death. A little bit of mess is good. This is a kitchen where people actually cook, not a magazine set.\*

*Made with love in the Heartland*