

Beyond Plain Pork

Butterflying and stuffing with summer vegetables adds moistness, flavor, and eye-appeal to a boneless roast

BY HARTMUT HANDKE



Simple but delicious. Juicy roast pork loin is studded with colorful vegetables. Roasted tomato sauce and puréed potatoes with shallots are terrific accompaniments.

Searing improves flavor and keeps juices in. Before roasting, all sides of the roast should be evenly browned in a hot skillet with a little oil.



STUFFED BONELESS PORK LOIN

Serves six to eight.

2 to 2½-pound boneless pork loin
Salt and pepper to taste
Fresh rosemary and thyme, chopped
Oil

FOR THE STUFFING:

1 pound mixed trimmed and cut vegetables (about 5 cups)

Choose from:

Small mushrooms, in quarters
Red, yellow, and green peppers, in medium julienne
Yellow squash, in half-rounds
Zucchini, in half-rounds
Carrots, in thin slices
Eggplant, in peeled half-rounds
Scallions, in 2-inch lengths

1 tablespoon chopped shallot
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
2 tablespoons chopped mixed fresh herbs—
parsley, thyme, rosemary, and oregano
Salt and pepper
¼ cup olive oil



These vegetables are ready for the stuffing. They've been seared for color and flavor, and then roasted until tender and fully cooked.



Rolling the stuffing in plastic makes it easy to shape. One end of the roll is tied securely, and then the other end is twisted until the stuffing is compressed into a perfect cylinder.

When deciding whether I'm going to add a stuffing to a cut of meat, I ask myself, "Will a stuffing improve the flavor, the look, and—in my case as a restaurant chef—the sales value of the meat?" For boneless pork roast, the answer to those questions is "yes" all around. A stuffing adds moisture and flavor to the pork, which can be dry and bland on its own. Adding a stuffing transforms a plain piece of meat into a dish that is enticing to my customers and will be to your friends and family, too.

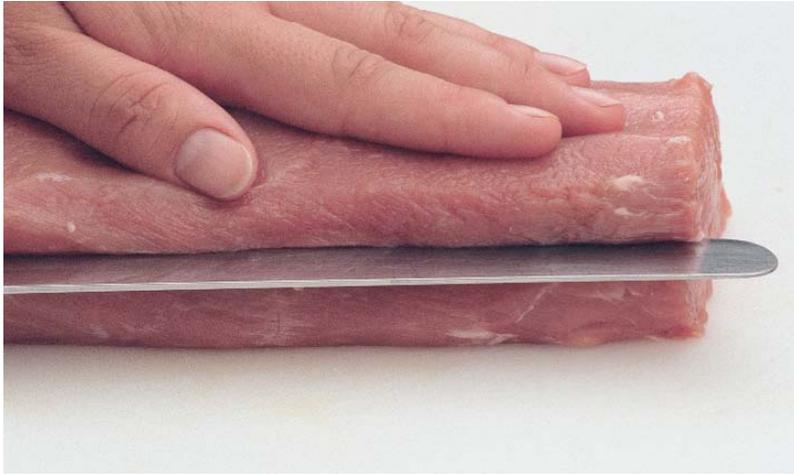
My stuffing is made with pan-seared vegetables loaded with fresh herbs and olive oil, so it's very moist, and colorful, too. To open and stuff the roast easily and efficiently, first I butterfly it and open it up like a book. I season the meat on the inside, add the stuffing, and then truss and roast the pork loin. When I carve the finished roast, I have perfectly shaped slices, with a beautiful mosaic of vibrant vegetables surrounded by an even band of meat.

MY STUFFING MAKES ROASTING THE PORK EASY

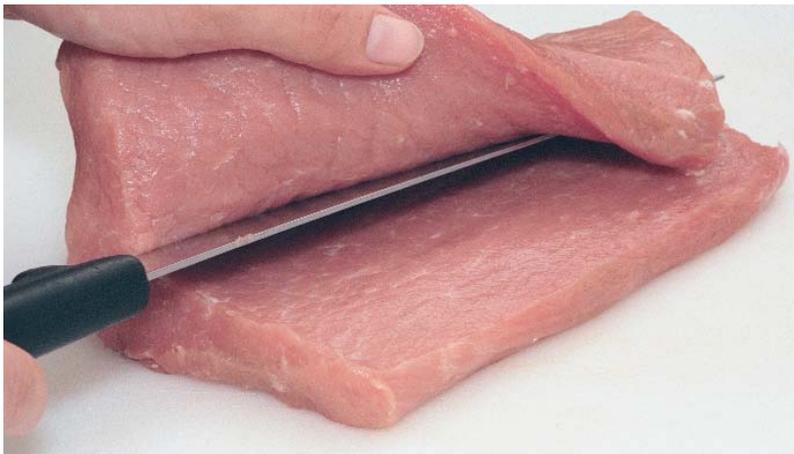
A big advantage of my stuffing is that it's completely cooked before it goes into the roast; this allows me to concentrate on cooking the roast to perfection, without worrying about whether the stuffing is correctly cooked at the same time. With old-style forcemeat or mousse stuffings (which contain raw meat, eggs, and cream), the cooking might be compromised—the roast a little overdone in order to adequately cook the stuffing. Here, I can cook the roast so the meat is pale pink and juicy. The fact that the vegetables are completely cooked also means that they won't change shape or give off juices during cooking, which could make the stuffing shrink or slide.

The ingredients. I use a variety of summery vegetables in the stuffing: eggplant, bell peppers, scallions, zucchini, yellow squash, carrots, and mushrooms (see ingredient list at left). I want to have 4 to 5 cups of chopped vegetables for a raw 2-pound roast. Along with the vegetables, I add about a tablespoon of chopped shallot, a teaspoon of chopped garlic, and 2 tablespoons of chopped mixed fresh herbs, like parsley, thyme, oregano, and rosemary. Almost any combination of vegetables and herbs will work, though I stay away from very wet vegetables, such as tomatoes, and from flavors that are very strong and don't pair easily, such as asparagus.

I cut the vegetables in varying sizes so that they'll all cook at the same rate. I leave the eggplant pretty chunky because it collapses a lot during cooking, while I cut carrots small because they're dense and slow-cooking. The overall size of the cuts, however, is pretty large. If I cut the vegetables into small dice,



The right way to butterfly. The knife is level and the chef's hand is stretched flat, ready to sense any deviation in the cut.



The butterflied pork is opened like a book. Any uneven spots can be pounded out to give a perfect expanse of meat, ready to season and stuff.

they would look great raw, but once cooked, the colors and shapes would blur together.

The cooking method. I mix all the vegetables, shallot, garlic, herbs, and salt and pepper together with about 3 tablespoons of olive oil and leave them to marinate about 30 minutes at room temperature. I cook the stuffing in two steps—first, pan-searing on top of the stove and, second, finishing in the oven. To pan-sear, I heat another tablespoon of olive oil in a very hot skillet. I add the vegetables and cook them over high heat for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring or shaking the pan constantly so they don't burn. This method caramelizes the vegetables, giving them a nice color and, more importantly, developing a deeper flavor. Next, I spread out the sautéed vegetables on a sheet pan and finish cooking them in a hot oven, about 400°F, for another 5 to 10 minutes, just until they're tender. To keep things simple at home, you could finish cooking them in the frying pan on top of the stove if you pay careful attention.

Use low heat, and if the vegetables seem to be browning too much or drying out, add a little water or stock. Certain vegetables, such as carrots and onions, have a lot of sugar in them and can burn easily. To avoid this, you could cut these sugary ingredients thinner and add them last.

Shaping the stuffing. After I cook the stuffing, I let it cool, and then wrap it up in plastic wrap to form a cylinder, which I then freeze. This method gives me stuffing in a solid shape, which is very easy to handle when filling and trussing the meat because the stuffing stays securely in the center of the roast, and bits of vegetables don't fall out of the ends. It also means that I can prepare my stuffing way ahead of time, and in large quantities, so it's ready to pull out of the freezer whenever needed. This method is standard efficiency for a professional kitchen, but it would also be a help when entertaining or even when cooking this roast for a midweek meal.

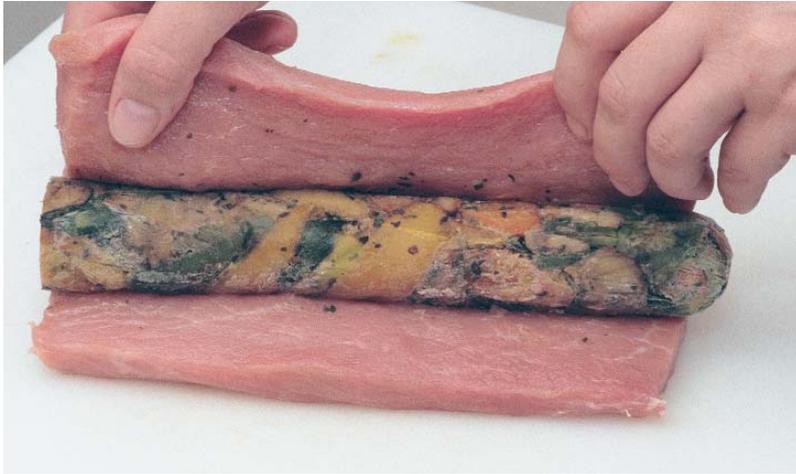
To make the cylinder, which should be about 1½ inches in diameter, I lay a double thickness of plastic wrap on the counter. I spoon the cooled stuffing down the center in a line about as long as my pork loin, and then fold over one side of the plastic and shape the stuffing into a loose log. I roll the log completely in the plastic wrap, and then I twist one end to close, tying with a piece of string to secure it. I twist the other end until the whole log gets nice and tight (see the photo on p. 55) and tie that end tightly.

BUTTERFLY TO OPEN, TRUSS TO CLOSE

To butterfly the roast, first I trim off the fat. Personally, I like fat on pork, but we're going a little leaner at the restaurant in response to customer requests, so I trim the pork completely. You can leave as much or as little fat as you like; the rest of the preparation and cooking is the same, whether the meat is trimmed or not.

The boneless pork loin is shaped like a slightly flattened cylinder. To butterfly it, I make one straight cut along one long edge, cutting almost through to the other long side. My goal is to get the piece of pork so it's all one thickness. I just gauge the thickness of the meat, divide that measurement by two, and stop my cut that distance from the edge of the meat. For example, if the pork is 2 inches thick, when I cut through the middle, I'll create two sides that are each an inch thick. Therefore, I'll bring the knife through the meat to within an inch of the back side. When I open out the butterflied meat, the whole piece will be an inch thick.

This cutting technique is pretty easy. I make sure that the whole edge of the knife blade is in contact with the meat (as shown in the top photo at left), so that I can check that I'm starting out straight. I apply a little pressure on the top of the meat with



Frozen solid and easy to use. The frozen stuffing stays put, so the meat can be neatly wrapped around it.

my stretched-out hand to secure the meat and to help me keep the cut level. I try not to saw back and forth too much, but rather to make one continuous pulling stroke toward me. Of course, I use a very sharp knife to do this right.

When I've cut far enough, I open up the meat like a book (see the bottom photo at left) and lay it flat. If I see any uneven spots, I put the meat between two pieces of plastic wrap and gently pound them out.

Adding the vegetable stuffing. When the meat is uniformly thick, I season it with some salt and pepper, unwrap the frozen stuffing, and place it in the center of the meat. I wrap the meat around the stuffing (as shown in the photo above) and butt the two long edges together in a neat seam, which neither overlaps nor gaps. I actually do want to have a little extra meat at this seam for slack, however, because as the roast cooks, the meat will shrink slightly. By just pushing and easing some more meat at the seam edge, I'm giving enough allowance for shrinkage so that when the roast is cooked, the meat will form a perfectly flush seam and the finished slice will look great.

With this kind of stuffing, I don't need to worry about closing up the ends of the roast. Because it's frozen, it won't fall out during trussing and searing.

Now I truss the meat in order to keep the stuffing securely in the center of the roast, and also to help the roast keep a nice straight shape during cooking. For detailed instructions on trussing, see Basics.

A TWO-STEP ROASTING METHOD

To give the meat a little more flavor, I like to roll it in some more chopped herbs and, of course, season it with salt and pepper. Rosemary and thyme are nice because they have strong flavors and are tough herbs. Herbs like parsley are too fragile and

delicately flavored to withstand the searing and roasting process.

The initial searing. Any meat should be seared on top of the stove before it goes in the oven. Searing does two things—it closes the pores of the meat so that all the juice doesn't run out during roasting, and it caramelizes the outside of the meat, giving it a nice color and flavor. Some recipes will tell you to sear the roast by placing it in a very hot oven for the first few minutes, then turning the oven heat down, but I don't believe that this method is effective—you won't get true caramelization of the meat juices.

To sear the pork, I heat a little more oil in a skillet, add the roast, and cook over medium-high heat until browned, turning it so all sides are evenly colored. I'm not trying to cook the pork here, I'm just coloring the outside layer of meat. Searing done, I transfer the meat to a rack in a roasting pan and leave it in the refrigerator until I'm ready to roast. I always like to roast meat and poultry on a rack, not directly on the roasting pan, so the heat can circulate freely around the roast. Also, I avoid getting an overcooked crusty area where the meat touches the pan.

Roasting and serving. I roast the pork in a 375°F oven for 15 to 20 minutes to the pound. When the pork is cooked, the internal temperature should read around 150° on a meat thermometer for pink, juicy meat. The temperature will increase slightly once the roast is out of the oven, so you can remove the roast when the thermometer reads about 145°. I make sure to embed the thermometer in the meat and not in the stuffing.

I always let any roasted meat or poultry rest out of the oven, but in a warm place, for about 15 minutes before carving and serving. This lets the juices redistribute throughout the flesh, making the meat tenderer and juicier.

At my restaurant, I like to serve this pork roast with a roasted tomato sauce, but for serving at a family meal, the roast really doesn't need pairing with a sauce. The substantial vegetable stuffing supplies plenty of flavor and color. I like to serve this with a bottle of Côtes du Rhône. The big flavors of the wine work great with the Mediterranean feel of the vegetable and herb stuffing.

Hartmut Handke is one of the 50 chefs certified as a Master Chef (CMC) by the American Culinary Federation, and he has won dozens of medals in worldwide culinary competitions. He was Executive Chef at The Greenbrier, a five-star resort in West Virginia, and in 1991 he moved to Columbus, Ohio, to open his own restaurant, Handke's Cuisine. ♦