

[Brandywine Table]

Cast Iron Cookery

THE VERSATILITY OF CAST IRON COOKWARE—IDEAL FOR SAUTEING, PAN- AND DEEP-FRYING AND BAKING

Laura Muzzi Brennan



Chef Jarrett Young

LONG AFTER INSTAPOTS AND QUARTZ COUNTERTOPS have fallen out of fashion, your cast iron cookware will still be going strong. With proper care, these workhorses keep their looks and function beautifully for decades.

It's no wonder then that cast iron cooking has been enjoying a renaissance, so much so, that last fall, when **Chef Jarrett Young** taught a class on the subject at **Main Line School Night**, it sold out immediately. When he added a second class, that sold out too.

I caught up with Chef Young this winter in the kitchen of Central Montco Technical High School where he is the Culinary Arts instructor. Before joining the faculty at CMTHS—where his photo hangs on the wall of notable alums—this CIA-trained chef honed his skills in various upscale kitchens, including Savona in Radnor. He's also worked with renowned chef Peter Gilmore at Delaware County Community College's culinary arts program, and he teaches classes and runs culinary camps for kids through his business, **Create-A-Cook**.

Young ticks off the reasons that everyone—from millennials in tiny apartment kitchens to grandmothers with cupboard space to spare—treasures cast iron. It's reasonably priced and low maintenance. It conducts heat evenly, and its versatility makes it ideal for sautéing, pan- and deep-frying and baking. And when you ask it to go from stovetop to oven, it does so with ease. But perhaps its greatest virtue is its ability to lend a deep golden crust to steaks, pizza and bread, giving you the sense that all is right with the world.

When it comes to seafood, Young says, most people don't reach for the cast iron ... but they should,

especially for scallops and sturdy fish and fish steaks. And dessert? Let's just say that when Young mentioned a skillet-baked salted caramel apple crumble, I was sold.

While there are few iron-clad rules for cooking in cast iron, it's best to avoid acidic ingredients like tomatoes and citrus juice until your cookware is highly seasoned. (For how to season and care for cast iron, see the sidebar.)

For our menu that evening, Young drew inspiration from his grandmother, as he offered me innovative versions of dishes he remembers her cooking in a large skillet. He fried chicken thigh roulade in a cast iron wok, which I immediately decided to purchase. He served fancy mac and cheese (cavatappi with gruyere and cheddar) in a classic skillet as well as in a tri-legged mini Dutch oven that, given its contents, bore a striking resemblance to a pot of gold.

Besides feeling lucky to taste Young's cooking, I left our dinner with a newfound appreciation for the myriad shapes, sizes and functions of cast iron cooking equipment.

The bottom line: find the piece (or pieces!) that suit your kitchen and get cooking.



Classic Crusty Cavatappi with Gruyère and Cheddar

A terrific take on mac and cheese from Chef Jarrett Young.

- 2 lb. cavatappi pasta
- 4 Tb. olive oil
- 8 Tb. unsalted butter (1 stick)
- ¼ C. onion, cut into small dice
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ C. all-purpose flour
- 6 C. half-and-half, cold
- ½ tsp. freshly ground nutmeg (optional)
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
- 3 C. shredded Gruyère cheese
- 3 C. shredded white cheddar cheese
- ½ C. grated Parmesan cheese
- ½ C. panko (Japanese bread crumbs)
- 2 Tb. chopped parsley

Preheat oven to 375°.

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta, stirring occasionally. Undercook the pasta—2 minutes less than the package instructions. Before draining, reserve some of the pasta water to thin the sauce if needed. Transfer drained pasta to a large bowl and drizzle with the olive oil. Stir well.

Return the saucepan to medium-high heat and melt the butter. Add the onion and sweat until the onion is translucent, about 3–4 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 1 more minute until fragrant. Then add the flour and cook, stirring well, until the flour is thoroughly incorporated, 1 to 3 minutes. Whisk in the cold half-and-half, nutmeg and a generous pinch of salt, and bring to a boil.

Lower heat and simmer, whisking frequently to smooth out any lumps, for 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Add a pinch of pepper and two-thirds each of the Gruyère and cheddar. Stir until smooth.

Pour the cheese sauce onto the pasta and stir well. Transfer to a cast iron skillet and top with the remaining one-third Gruyère and cheddar and all the Parmesan. Sprinkle evenly with the panko bread crumbs.



Caring and Seasoning of Cast Iron

When you take care of your cast iron cookware, it will take of you, rewarding you with decades of great dishes. Just keep these tips in mind.

Keep it clean and dry. Hand wash cast iron with warm water or just wipe it out. To release stubborn stuck-on bits, rub with coarse salt and wash. Never let cast iron soak. Dry thoroughly with a dishtowel or put it on the stove on low heat for 10 minutes.

Season and re-season. Some cast iron cookware, like many Lodge products, come preseasoned. If yours does not, wash it with mild soap and dry it well. Rub cookware all over (including handles) with vegetable or canola oil. Heat oven to 200–250° and place a piece of aluminum foil on the bottom of oven to catch drips. Put cookware upside on rack and “bake” for an hour. Cool before storing away.

Get rid of the rust. Use steel wool and a little water to remove rust spots. Then, re-season the piece.

Personal note: It took me ten SOS pads and one solid hour of scrubbing and rinsing to remove the layer of rust covering 90% of the cast iron skillet I'd ignored in the basement for years. But once I'd reseasoned it, the pan looked almost new!

~From Chef Jarrett Young and KitchenToTheTable.com

Bake until the top is lightly browned, and the sauce is bubbly, 15 to 20 minutes. Let stand for 5 minutes and sprinkle with parsley before serving.

Makes 8–10 servings.

Chicken Thigh Roulade

Chef Jarrett Young's fancy take on fried chicken is a labor of love as you can see from this lengthy recipe.

Notes: Moo glue is a natural enzyme that binds protein-based foods together. You can purchase it online. A sous vide machine or stick allows you to put food in a plastic pouch and cook it in a temperature-controlled water bath. They used to be found only in professional kitchens, but nowadays, it's easy to find them at most cooking stores. Or, if you were lucky enough to find an Instant Pot (or InstaPot) under the tree this year, you may see a sous vide function on it.

- 4 chicken thighs, boneless, skin on
- 3 tablespoons RM Transglutaminase, aka “moo glue”
- 1½ C. all-purpose flour
- 1 Tb. garlic powder
- 1 Tb. onion powder
- 1 Tb. sweet paprika
- 1 tsp. cayenne pepper
- ½ Tb. ground cumin
- Iodized salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 C. buttermilk
- 1 Tb. hot chili sauce, such as Sriracha

- Peanut oil, for frying (substitution: canola, safflower or other oil with neutral taste and high smoke point)
- ¼ head garlic, smashed, husk still attached
- ¼ bunch fresh thyme
- 3–4 sprigs sage
- 2 big sprigs fresh rosemary



Gently peel skin away from chicken thighs, being careful not to tear skin. Lay skin on plastic wrap with the outside of the skin on the plastic wrap. Position plastic wrap and skin in the same direction on your workspace (positioned north to south). Trim all fat off chicken thigh meat and cut in half (from top to bottom). Butterfly each half at the thickest point of the meat.

Sprinkle “moo glue” on the skin and place one half of thigh meat on top of the skin closest to you. Sprinkle “moo glue” on top of the first half of meat. Then place second half of meat on top, and sprinkle “moo glue” on top of second piece of meat. Roll the thigh meat in the skin, making sure to cover all meat in skin. Trim excess skin once all meat is rolled. Then tightly roll chicken in plastic wrap as to remove all air. Twist ends of plastic wrap in opposite directions and tie ends with kitchen twine to secure. Trim excess plastic wrap and twine from ends. Repeat with remaining chicken thighs.

Place in sous vide machine set to 145° and cook for 1–1½ hours. Chicken thighs will be firm and spring back when done. Keeping them wrapped, place cooked chickens in an ice bath to cool. Once cooled, continue to the next step or refrigerate overnight.

In a large shallow platter, mix the flour, garlic powder, onion powder, paprika and cayenne until well-blended; season generously with salt and black pepper. In another platter, combine buttermilk and chili sauce with a fork and season with salt and black pepper.

Remove chicken from plastic wrap and pat dry. Using a sharp knife slice off the ends of the chicken. Slice the chicken in half and then slice those halves in half again to make 4, 1” to 1 ¼” cylinders. Dredge the pieces, a few at a time, in the buttermilk and then dip

them in the seasoned flour. Repeat this dipping process twice. Let the chicken rest while you prepare the oil.

Fill a cast iron skillet about three-quarters full of oil. Add the garlic, sage, thyme and rosemary to the cool oil and heat over medium-high heat until the oil registers 350° on a deep-fry thermometer. Remove herbs when fragrant and right before they’re browned. The herbs and garlic will perfume the oil with their flavor as the oil comes up to temperature.

Working in batches of 3 to 4 pieces at a time, carefully add the chicken to the pot and fry, turning once, until golden brown and cooked through, about 4–6 minutes.

Remove the chicken from the pot with a skimmer, shaking off as much oil as you can, and put them on a cooling rack to drain. Season all sides with salt and a dusting of black pepper. Repeat with the remaining chicken pieces. You can use the fried herbs and garlic for garnish if you’d like.

Serve chicken immediately with prepared Harissa Cream and Lemon-Honey Drizzle.

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Harissa Cream

¼ C. plain Greek yogurt
¼ C. sour cream
Salt and black pepper, to taste
1 Tb. spicy harissa paste
½ tsp. chopped thyme leaves
½ lemon, juiced and zested

Place yogurt and sour cream in a small bowl; season with salt and pepper. Add harissa paste, thyme, lemon juice and zest. Mix well and adjust to taste.

Makes ½ C.

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Lemon-Honey Drizzle

2 Tb. honey
½ to 1 tsp. lemon juice, to taste
¼ tsp. lemon zest
Salt to taste

In small bowl, combine first honey, lemon juice and zest and mix well. Season to taste with salt.

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The Perfect Steak

When it comes to pan-cooking the perfect steak, Chef Jarrett Young cites Gordon Ramsay and Heston Blumenthal as influences. I studied up on their methods as well as consulting my go-to guy, J. Kenji Lopez-Alt of Serious Eats and The Food Lab fame. Here’s my take.

1 ribeye, 1½” thick, ¾–1 lb.
Kosher salt
¼ C. canola oil
2 Tb. butter

Pat steak dry with paper towels. Salt steak generously on both sides and let sit at room temperature for 10 minutes. Lopez likes to salt two days in advance, but if you don’t have time, rest assured that I’ve taken a steak directly from the refrigerator, salted it and let it sit for 10 minutes, and no one’s complained about the final result.

Heat oil on high in a 10” or 12” cast iron skillet until it just starts to smoke. Add steak and cook for 2 minutes. Flip and cook for another 2 minutes.

Add butter and reduce heat to medium-high. Using a turkey baster, baste the steak with butter and flip after 20–30 seconds. Flip again after 20–30 seconds, baste and repeat the process until steak reaches desired temperature. For medium rare, remove steak from pan when internal temperature reaches 120–125°.

Place steak on serving plate and pour juices over. Cover very loosely with foil. Rest for 10 minutes.

Save juices for individual Yorkshire puddings.

Makes 1–2 servings.

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Individual Yorkshire Puddings

You can eat these with a knife and a fork alongside your steak or slathered with butter and eaten out of hand like a bigger, flatter popover.

1½ Tb. drippings from steak, plus more for greasing mini skillets
1½ C. all-purpose flour
3 large eggs, room temperature
1½ C. whole milk, room temperature

Preheat oven to 425°. Whisk together drippings, flour, eggs and milk. Grease 4–5, 6” cast iron skillets and place in middle rack of oven to heat for a minute or two. (Leave 6” between middle rack and top rack or remove top rack completely because puddings will puff up.)

Working quickly, pour batter nearly halfway up sides of each skillet. Bake for 12–15 minutes until puddings are puffed and golden. Try your hardest not to open



oven while puddings bake. You don’t want them to fall!

Makes 4–5 servings. ♦

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Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother’s Betty Crocker’s Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 700+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.

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