

Porchetta for the Holidays

Italy's rich herb-and-garlic-infused slow-cooked pork is one of the world's best street foods. We wanted to transform it into a roast for company.

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Italy's *porchetta*—fall-apart tender, rich pieces of slow-cooked pork, aromatic with garlic, fennel seeds, rosemary, and thyme and served with pieces of crisp skin on a crusty roll—is one of the world's greatest street foods. Traditionally a whole pig is boned and the meat is rubbed with an herb-spice paste. The pig is then tied around a spit and allowed to sit overnight. The next day, it's slow-roasted over a wood fire until the meat is ultratender and the skin is burnished and crackling-crisp.

Recently, porchetta came to mind as I pondered my holiday roast options. It may sound strange, given that a sandwich doesn't offer much in the way of presentation, but it's such a knockout for flavor that I had to wonder: Could I make a few tweaks to transform porchetta from street-fare sandwich to holiday centerpiece?

Going whole hog wasn't an option, so my first task was picking the right substitute. Some recipes call for wrapping a pork belly around a pork loin. I ruled out that scenario from the get-go for being too fussy; plus, pork loin takes more work to keep juicy. Pork belly alone is also a popular choice since it comes with skin attached and it's very fatty (it's what you make bacon from, after all). I found that it was easy to tie into a compact roll that sliced neatly, its skin cooked up crisp and crackly, and the meat was tender and moist. But I ultimately decided against it, too, since it's often composed of more fat than meat—fine for bacon but a bit much for porchetta.

Pork butt, cut from the upper portion of the shoulder, was my best bet. It generally cooks up flavorful and moist, and it's fatty without being over the top. Its lack of skin was a drawback, but I decided I could live with it since I suspected I could brown and crisp the fat cap as a stand-in.

That said, the recipes I tried featuring pork butt left something to be desired. Even though the meat was tender and juicy at the center, it got progressively drier and tougher toward the exterior. The herb paste



A sharp, boldly flavored paste made with fennel seeds, plenty of herbs, a dozen cloves of garlic, and ground black pepper complements the rich meat.

was poorly distributed, and the irregular, loose shape of the roast meant it was hard to slice into neat pieces elegant enough for a holiday dinner.

The Skin I'm In

When cooking a pork butt, low-and-slow is best since it allows the ample collagen time to melt, creating an ultratender roast; it also helps mitigate the difference in cooking between the interior and exterior. I found that 6 hours produced the best results, but that was just too long. Cutting the roast in half lengthwise decreased the cooking time by almost half, and it gave me two cylindrical roasts that sliced nicely, especially when I tied them with twine.

Now the meat was cooking through more evenly and more quickly, but the exterior was still a bit dry. I had noticed when testing the pork belly version that all of the meat was juicy and tender despite having been cooked at a much higher temperature than my pork butts were. Was it the greater amount of fat? Or was it the fact that when tied into a roll, the meat in

the pork belly was entirely encased within a layer of skin?

Increasing the amount of fat in my pork butt wasn't on the table, but I had a notion for how to fake a layer of skin around it: aluminum foil. For my next test, I covered the roasting pan tightly with foil, roasted the pork until its interior registered 180 degrees, and then removed the foil. A billow of steam wafted up, and I noticed that the meat had shed about a cup of broth liquid into the pan—good signs. While the roasts were pale and wan on the exterior, the meat was tender and juicy throughout, with little discernible difference between the exterior and the core. Here's why: The steam kept the surface temperature of the roast from exceeding the boiling point of water (212 degrees), preventing the exterior from overcooking as the interior came up to temperature. Cooking with steam also sped up the cooking, since steam is a better conductor of heat than air is. The cooking time was down to about 2 hours.

I drained the juices from the pan, untied the roasts, and returned them to a 500-degree oven for a short stint to brown.

A Cut Above

Next, I shifted my focus to the paste. Some recipes called for rubbing the paste onto the roast, with the hope that the flavor would penetrate. Others called for poking holes in the roast with a knife and stuffing the paste into them. The latter approach worked better than the former, but it was slow work and impossible to tell whether I'd done a good job until serving time. There had to be a better way.

I tried pulling each roast apart along the seams while still keeping the pieces attached to each other—basically unfolding each roast—and then rubbing the

Why Some Fat Melts and Some Crisps

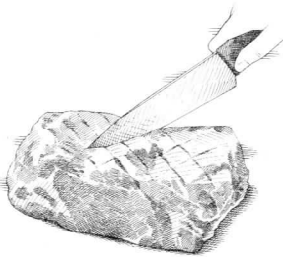
For fat to render, or melt, the fat has to be released from the bounds of its cells—that's why cutting shallow slits in the fat cap helps. But when exterior fat that's still trapped within cells is exposed to the heat of the oven and reaches a high enough temperature (well beyond 300 degrees), it oxidizes, leading to a series of reactions that produces flavorful molecules and brown pigments and leads to cross-linking of those pigments, which delivers that familiar crisp texture.



▶ Watch Every Step

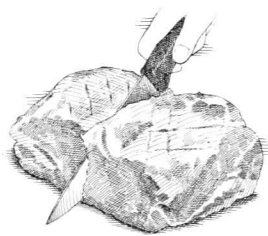
A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec16](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/dec16)

STEP BY STEP | TRANSFORMING PORK BUTT INTO PORCHETTA



CROSSHATCH FAT CAP

Crosshatching the fat cap allows heat to penetrate, which helps the fat render just below the surface.



HALVE ROAST Two smaller roasts are evenly shaped and cook more quickly.



CUT SLITS INTO ROASTS These openings allow for even, thorough seasoning and also ensure that the roast holds its shape when sliced.



TIE ROASTS Tying the roasts along their length before cooking gives them an even shape that allows for neat slicing.



TREAT FAT CAP A rub of baking soda (which accelerates browning) and salt and an overnight stint in the fridge dry out the fat cap to help it cook up crisp.

paste all over before tying each piece back together. That worked in terms of distribution, but the roasts fell apart at the seams during slicing. A similar thing happened when I butterflied the roasts along their length. The problem in both cases was that I had created seams that ran perpendicular to the direction in which the roast would be sliced. So what if the cuts ran in the *same* direction as the slices?

For my next test, I cut a series of parallel slits through each roast along its length, stopping 1 inch from each end. Getting the paste into the roast was easy since the slits were big enough to let me use my hands to push the paste in from both sides. I rubbed each roast with salt, applied the paste, and let the roasts sit overnight in the fridge, which gave the salt time to penetrate the meat. This worked perfectly and guaranteed that every serving was deeply flavored and that the meat would slice neatly.

All that remained was to improve the appearance and texture of the fat cap “skin.” I had avoided putting the herb paste on the fat cap to give it a better chance of crisping up, but it was still a bit pale, and the fat just below the surface wasn’t particularly well rendered. To improve things, I used a sharp knife to create 1-inch-wide crosshatches through the cap, which would let heat penetrate and the fat render out. To help it dry out and thus crisp up, I rubbed the fat cap with salt and left the roasts uncovered for their overnight rest. Finally, to boost browning, I added a bit of baking soda to the salt rub. Baking soda creates a more alkaline environment, which makes browning

reactions more likely to occur. Crisp, rich, and deeply browned, the fat cap was the perfect complement to the tender, moist, boldly flavored meat beneath. This porchetta might have simple street-food roots, but it’s worthy of taking center stage on any holiday table.

PORCHETTA

SERVES 8 TO 10

Pork butt roast is often labeled Boston butt in the supermarket. Look for a roast with a substantial fat cap. If fennel seeds are unavailable, substitute $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of ground fennel. The *porchetta* needs to be refrigerated for 6 to 24 hours once it is rubbed with the paste, but it is best when it sits for a full 24 hours.

- 3 tablespoons fennel seeds
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh rosemary leaves (2 bunches)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh thyme leaves (2 bunches)
- 12 garlic cloves, peeled
- Kosher salt and pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 (5- to 6-pound) boneless pork butt roast, trimmed
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda

1. Grind fennel seeds in spice grinder or mortar and pestle until finely ground. Transfer ground fennel to food processor and add rosemary, thyme, garlic, 1 tablespoon pepper, and 2 teaspoons salt. Pulse mixture until finely chopped, 10 to 15 pulses. Add oil and

process until smooth paste forms, 20 to 30 seconds.

2. Using sharp knife, cut slits in surface fat of roast, spaced 1 inch apart, in crosshatch pattern, being careful not to cut into meat. Cut roast in half with grain into 2 equal pieces.

3. Turn each roast on its side so fat cap is facing away from you, bottom of roast is facing toward you, and newly cut side is facing up. Starting 1 inch from short end of each roast, use boning or paring knife to make slit that starts 1 inch from top of roast and ends 1 inch from bottom, pushing knife completely through roast. Repeat making slits, spaced 1 to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches apart, along length of each roast, stopping 1 inch from opposite end (you should have 6 to 8 slits, depending on size of roast).

4. Turn roast so fat cap is facing down. Rub sides and bottom of each roast with 2 teaspoons salt, taking care to work salt into slits from both sides. Rub herb paste onto sides and bottom of each roast, taking care to work paste into slits from both sides. Flip roast so that fat cap is facing up. Using 3 pieces of kitchen twine per roast, tie each roast into compact cylinder.

5. Combine 1 tablespoon salt, 1 teaspoon pepper, and baking soda in small bowl. Rub fat cap of each roast with salt–baking soda mixture, taking care to work mixture into crosshatches. Transfer roasts to wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate, uncovered, for at least 6 hours or up to 24 hours.

6. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Transfer roasts, fat side up, to large roasting pan, leaving at least 2 inches between roasts. Cover tightly with aluminum foil. Cook until pork registers 180 degrees, 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

7. Remove pan from oven and increase oven temperature to 500 degrees. Carefully remove and discard foil and transfer roasts to large plate. Discard liquid in pan. Line pan with foil. Remove twine from roasts; return roasts to pan, directly on foil; and return pan to oven. Cook until exteriors of roasts are well browned and interiors register 190 degrees, 20 to 30 minutes.

8. Transfer roasts to carving board and let rest for 20 minutes. Slice roasts $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick, transfer to serving platter, and serve.

TECHNIQUE Roasting Under Wraps

Italian *porchetta* made with a whole pig stays moist over a long cooking time because the pig’s skin acts as a protective layer. Since pork butt lacks skin, we use aluminum foil to trap the steam created from the roasts’ drippings and keep the meat moist. Covering the pan with foil has two other benefits. First, because the temperature of water (here in the form of steam) cannot go above 212 degrees, the temperature gradient between the outer portion of the roast and the interior is minimized, and the roast cooks more evenly. Second, because water conducts heat better than air, the foil cover helps speed up the cooking time.

