

Grilled Glazed Chicken Breasts

Without skin or bone, this lean cut cooks so quickly that it's almost impossible to get it to taste both grilled *and* glazed. An unusual ingredient came to the rescue.

➤ BY KEITH DRESSER ⇐

Throwing a few boneless, skinless chicken breasts on the grill and painting them with barbecue sauce always sounds like a good idea. This lean cut is available everywhere, it cooks fast, and it makes a light, simple meal. The trouble is that the results are usually flawed. Because these disrobed specimens cook in a flash over coals, it's hard to get chicken that not only tastes grilled but also has a good glaze without overcooking it. Here's the dilemma: If you wait to apply the glaze until the meat is browned well, it's usually dry and leathery by the time you've lacquered on a few layers. (And you need a few layers to build anything more than a superficial skim of sauce.) But if you apply the glaze too soon, you don't give the chicken a chance to brown, a flavor boost that this bland cut badly needs. Plus, the sugary glaze is prone to burning before the chicken cooks through.

But the ease of throwing boneless, skinless breasts on the grill is too enticing to pass up. I decided to fiddle with the approach until I got it right: tender, juicy chicken with the smoky taste of the grill, glistening with a thick coating of glaze. While I was at it, I wanted to create glazes specifically designed to accentuate, not overwhelm, this lean cut's delicate flavors.

Better Browning in a Hurry

My first step was to brine the meat. I knew that a 30-minute saltwater soak would help keep the chicken juicy and well seasoned and could be accomplished while the grill was heating. I also opted for a two-level fire, which means that I piled two-thirds of the coals on one side of the kettle and just one-third on the other side. This would allow me to sear the breasts over the coals and then move them to the cooler side to avoid burning when I applied the glaze.

My real challenge was to figure out how to speed up browning, also known as the Maillard reaction,



Flipping the chicken four times during grilling—and slathering it with glaze right after each flip—helps build a thick, lacquered coating.

and the consequent formation of all those new flavor compounds that help meat taste rich and complex. If the chicken browned faster, it would leave me more time to build a thick glaze that would add even more flavor. My first thought was to enlist the aid of starch in absorbing some of the moisture on the exterior of the meat that normally would need to burn off before much browning could occur. First I tried dredging the breasts in flour, but this made them breaded. Next I tried cornstarch, but this approach turned the breasts gummy. A technique we have employed when pan-searing chicken breasts—creating an artificial “skin” using a paste of cornstarch, flour, and melted butter—gave us better results. The starches (which break down into sugars) and the butter proteins helped achieve a browned surface more quickly, and the porous surface readily held a glaze. Unfortunately, the chicken still tasted more breaded than grilled.

Switching gears, I tried rubbing the surface of the chicken with baking soda. Baking soda increases the pH of the chicken, making it more alkaline, which in

turn speeds up the Maillard reaction. Alas, while this did speed up browning, even small amounts left behind a mild soapy aftertaste.

I was unsure of what to do next. But then I remembered a really unlikely sounding test that one of my colleagues tried when attempting to expedite the browning of pork chops: dredging the meat in nonfat dry milk powder. While this strange coating did brown the meat more quickly, it made the chops taste too sweet. But might it be better suited for browning chicken? It was worth a try. After lightly dusting the breasts with milk powder (½ teaspoon per breast) and lightly spraying them with vegetable oil spray to help ensure that the powder stuck, I threw them on the grill. I was thrilled when the chicken was lightly browned and had nice grill marks in less than 2 minutes, or about half of the time of my most successful previous tests. Why was milk powder so effective? It turns out that dry milk powder contains about 36 percent protein. But it also contains about 50 percent lactose, a so-called reducing sugar. And the Maillard reaction takes place only after large proteins break down into amino acids and react with certain types of sugars—reducing sugars like glucose, fructose, and lactose. In sum, milk powder contained just the two components that I needed to speed things up.

But that wasn't the only reason milk powder was so successful in quickly triggering browning. Like starch, it's a dry substance that absorbs the excess moisture on the meat. This is helpful because moisture keeps the temperature too low for significant browning to take place until the wetness evaporates. There was yet one more benefit to using the milk powder: It created a thin, tacky surface that was perfect for holding on to the glaze. And now, with expedited browning in place, I had time to thoroughly lacquer my chicken with glaze by applying four solid coats before it finished cooking.

Great Glaze

Next it was time to focus on perfecting the glaze itself. I started with flavor. Since I knew that I wanted to limit the amount of sweetness so as not to overpower the mild flavor of the chicken, I began by testing a host of ingredients that would be thick enough to serve as a clingy base but weren't sugary.

See the Grill and Glaze

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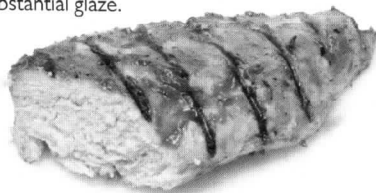
Where Grilling and Glazing Go Wrong

Here's what usually happens when you try for a deep sear and a substantial glaze.



BURNT GLAZE, BLAND MEAT

Layer on glaze from the get-go and it tends to burn. The chicken may be moist, but it lacks flavorful browning.



NICE GLAZE, DRY MEAT

If you wait to apply the sauce, you'll get good browning and a substantial glaze but dry, overcooked chicken.

Flip chicken, brush with remaining glaze, and cook until chicken registers 160 degrees, 1 to 3 minutes. Transfer chicken to plate and let rest for 5 minutes before serving.

COCONUT CURRY GLAZE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- ½ cup canned coconut milk
- 3 tablespoons corn syrup
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon red curry paste
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground coriander

Whisk lime juice and cornstarch together in small saucepan until cornstarch has dissolved. Whisk in coconut milk, corn syrup, fish sauce, curry paste, ginger, and coriander. Bring mixture to boil over high heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 1 minute. Transfer glaze to bowl.

HONEY MUSTARD GLAZE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons corn syrup
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¼ teaspoon ground fennel seeds

Whisk vinegar and cornstarch together in small saucepan until cornstarch has dissolved. Whisk in mustard, honey, corn syrup, garlic, and fennel seeds. Bring mixture to boil over high heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 1 minute. Transfer glaze to bowl.

SPICY HOISIN GLAZE

MAKES ABOUT ½ CUP

For a spicier glaze, use the larger amount of Sriracha sauce.

- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- ½ cup hoisin sauce
- 2 tablespoons light corn syrup
- 1–2 tablespoons Sriracha sauce
- 1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger
- ¼ teaspoon five-spice powder

Whisk vinegar and cornstarch together in small saucepan until cornstarch has dissolved. Whisk in hoisin, corn syrup, Sriracha, ginger, and five-spice powder. Bring mixture to boil over high heat. Cook, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 1 minute. Transfer glaze to bowl.

GRILLED GLAZED BONELESS, SKINLESS CHICKEN BREASTS

SERVES 4

For our free recipes for Miso Sesame Glaze and Molasses Coffee Glaze, go to CooksIllustrated.com/oct13.

- ¼ cup salt
- ¼ cup sugar
- 4 (6- to 8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breasts, trimmed
- 2 teaspoons nonfat dry milk powder
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- Vegetable oil spray
- 1 recipe glaze (recipes follow)

1. Dissolve salt and sugar in 1½ quarts cold water. Submerge chicken in brine, cover, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 1 hour. Remove chicken from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Combine milk powder and pepper in bowl.

2A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter mounded with charcoal briquettes (7 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour two-thirds evenly over half of grill, then pour remaining coals over other half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

2B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and turn other burner(s) to medium-high.

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Sprinkle half of milk powder mixture over 1 side of chicken. Lightly spray coated side of chicken with oil spray until milk powder is moistened. Flip chicken and sprinkle remaining milk powder mixture over second side. Lightly spray with oil spray.

4. Place chicken, skinned side down, over hotter part of grill and cook until browned on first side, 2 to 2½ minutes. Flip chicken, brush with 2 tablespoons glaze, and cook until browned on second side, 2 to 2½ minutes. Flip chicken, move to cooler side of grill, brush with 2 tablespoons glaze, and cook for 2 minutes. Repeat flipping and brushing 2 more times, cooking for 2 minutes on each side.

I settled on a diverse group that included coconut milk, mustard, and hoisin sauce. Then, in order to add balance and complexity, I introduced acidity in the form of citrus juice or vinegar, as well as a healthy dose of spices and aromatics, like red curry paste, fresh ginger, and spicy Sriracha sauce.

My next step was to add a sweet (but not too sweet) element, which would provide further balance, promote browning, and give even more of a sticky cling to the glaze. Sweeteners like maple syrup, brown sugar, and fruit jams made the glazes saccharine. Corn syrup, which is about half as sweet as the other sweeteners, worked far better, giving the glaze just a goodly amount of stickiness while keeping the sweetness level under control. Two to 3 tablespoons, depending on the other ingredients, was just the right amount.

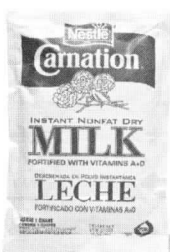
But all was not perfect: The glazes still had a tendency to become too loose when applied to the hot chicken after it browned. Whisking in a teaspoon of cornstarch helped.

At this point I was feeling pretty good. But many tasters wanted an even thicker glaze. This time I looked to adjust my cooking technique. My fix? I switched up the point at which I applied the glaze. Instead of brushing it on right before flipping the chicken, I began to apply the glaze immediately after it was flipped. This meant that less glaze stuck to the grill—and the glaze applied to the top of the chicken had time to dry out and cling. The result? Chicken breasts robed in a thick, lacquered glaze. My dinner was ready.

The Power of Milk Powder

To make sure that our chicken breasts could be both browned and glazed in the time it took the chicken to

cook, we had to accelerate browning. A surprising ingredient—milk powder—was the solution. Milk powder contains both protein and so-called reducing sugar (in this case, lactose), the keys to the Maillard reaction, the chemical process that causes browning. Faster browning gave us more time to layer on the glaze.



BROWNING BOOSTER