

Prime time for beef

Simplicity is often unsurpassed, and that's true when it comes to the Best Way to cook a savory, succulent holiday rib roast

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Wednesday, December 17, 2003

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Blame Charles Dickens. Without him, Christmas just wouldn't be the same. No trees, no presents, no big family gatherings, and certainly no luscious prime rib dinners.

While Dickens didn't do it all single-handedly, his romantic vision of Christmas helped shape the traditions of the holiday season as we know it. And even though Tiny Tim in "A Christmas Carol" gave thanks for a roast goose, Dickens' many other novels celebrate the holiday beef roast.

And so it was in this spirit of celebration that we set out to create a perfect standing rib roast, or prime rib. We tested five different techniques to find the right combination of a well-seasoned crust and buttery-tender meat. And boy, did we find a winner -- and it's one of the simplest approaches.

We started with 2-rib roasts (about 3 to 4 pounds) from Whole Foods (\$8.99 per pound). For a large holiday gathering, you'll want a 3- to 5-rib roast, but the smaller roast served our purposes for testing without breaking our budget. When purchasing your roast, keep in mind that a "prime rib" does not refer to USDA prime-grade meat, but to the best cut of the rib section, which is usually from the loin.

We let all the roasts sit at room temperature for two hours before putting them in the oven to ensure even cooking. We seasoned them liberally with kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to create a savory, crispy brown crust.

Our least-favorite technique was the 1950s-era salt-crust roast. For this, we combined kosher salt with water to create a wet-snow-like paste, slathered it onto the beef and cooked it at 350 degrees for approximately 20 minutes per pound. The roast was a huge disappointment. The salt crust baked to a hard shell, preventing the meat from browning properly, while the meat itself, even though nicely pink throughout, was dry and chewy. It was not worth the effort -- or the price.

We took different approaches with our next two roasts, but reached similar results. For one, we cranked the oven to 500 degrees and roasted the meat for 5 minutes per pound. Then we turned the oven off and let the roast sit for two hours with the door closed, undisturbed. For the second roast, we went a more straightforward route, cooking it at 325 degrees for 20 minutes per pound to medium-rare.

While both roasts were beautifully brown on the outside and perfectly pink on the inside, Food and Wine staffers didn't get too excited about either. "It's beef," said one, while another thought one roast "needed sauce to be really good." These roasts were palatable, but not perfect.

We started getting into the perfection realm with the last two techniques. The runner-up employed a slow-roasting, long-cooking method. We started this roast by searing it on all sides on the stove to brown it, then put it in a 200-degree oven. An hour and 15 minutes per pound later, it was finally finished. We were rewarded with exceptionally tender, moist meat, but unless you're in the mood to wake up at dawn to get your dinner going, this method is not for you.

Our Best Way technique turned out to be one of the simplest. We started with a fairly hot oven -- 450 degrees -- and roasted the meat for 15 minutes to sear the outside. We then turned the dial down to 350 degrees and finished it off at 20 minutes per pound (about 1 1/2 hours total for our 3 1/2-pound roast). We removed it from the oven when a thermometer inserted in the middle (not hitting any bone) registered 125 degrees. We let it rest for about 20 minutes to allow the juices to settle and the meat continue cooking. It eventually climbed to about 140 degrees.

This was prime rib nirvana. Talk about a fantastic roast. While Food and Wine staffers were always eager to try the prime rib experiments, word quickly spread from the test kitchen that this was the one. The meat, succulent and buttery, was a perfect bull's eye of doneness: medium toward the outside and bouncy pink in the middle.

We didn't get this effect with the other roasts, and everyone liked the idea of a roast with varying degrees of doneness, especially since prime rib is designed to serve a crowd. And judging from the cacophony of oohs and aahs coming from the staffers, this roast well accommodated all tastes.

Dickens would be proud.

Standing Rib Roast

INGREDIENTS:

1 3-, 4-, or 5-bone standing rib roast (6-12 pounds), external cap of fat and meat removed and fat trimmed to about 1/2 inch

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

INSTRUCTIONS:

Let the roast stand at room temperature for approximately 2 hours.

Preheat the oven to 450° and adjust the rack to the lower third of the oven.

Using paper towels, pat the roast dry of excess moisture and season liberally on all sides with salt and pepper. Place the meat, fat-side up, in a shallow roasting pan (no roasting rack is necessary) and roast for 15 minutes.