

Food tips & techniques

steaming, pure and simple

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EVEN BEFORE PREHISTORIC cooks mastered fire, they cooked with steam, hauling rocks from natural hot springs to heat the water. The days of having to lug hot stones are gone, but today's chefs still turn to steam to achieve vibrant vegetables, ineffably tender fish, and other gently cooked delights.

To steam is to suspend food over simmering liquid, usually water, so the ingredients cook as the hot vapor swirls around them. A variety of tools can be employed to create this culinary sauna, some designed for the task, others improvised. In the West, there's the metal steamer insert fitted into a pot. In the East, the multilevel bamboo steamer is the gear of choice, enabling cooks to stack ingredients in tiers. The French often wrap foods *en papillote*, in parchment paper, thus steaming them in their own juices.

Regardless of how you choose to harness steam, a tight seal is essential. Monitoring the water level is also important. Too much water, and food is immersed—boiling, not steaming. Too

ON A (STEAM) ROLL A technique with many merits, steaming can be used to make savory and sweet dishes alike. This English pudding is sealed with a tea towel, making it easy to lift out of a hot pot.

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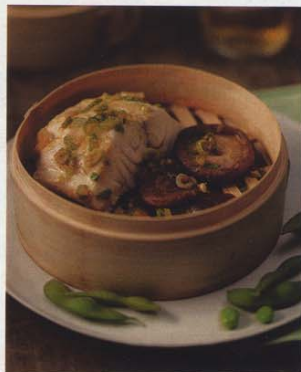
little, and you risk evaporation and scorched pans; in this case, any water you add should be boiling hot.

Steaming is a friend to harried cooks (it's speedier than waiting for a whole stockpot of water to boil) and, with the right ingredients, to health-minded ones (you can often forgo additional cooking fats). The method also can preserve nutrients and color, and impart the subtle flavors of broth, wine, or herb-infused liquids. Just some of the great reasons to go full steam ahead.

steamed ginger pudding

Steaming is the traditional way to cook one of these English cakes (right). The batter and jam are put into a heatproof bowl, then topped with parchment and a tea towel.

We used a pasta insert—the tall perforated basket that comes with some stockpots—to steam the pudding. The insert is roomy enough to accommodate the large bowl. It also keeps the pudding—which requires gentle cooking—a good distance from the burner.



steamed striped bass

The fish and shiitake mushrooms (near left) are steamed in the bottom basket, where the heat is stronger. Edamame (green soybeans), which just need to be heated through, can go in the top tier.

You may know bamboo steamers best from the dim sum table. But these baskets, made with slatted bottoms to let steam flow through multiple layers, can be used whenever you'd like to steam different courses for one meal. Set the steamer in a wok of simmering water (far left). For another recipe that utilizes a steam basket, see page 150.



steamed potatoes and carrots
Steaming these vegetables keeps their earthy flavors intact and results in a just-right level of tenderness. Tarragon butter coats the finished side dish (right).

A shallow steamer insert (above) is ideal for most vegetables, letting steam through perforations while keeping ingredients out of the water. Because vegetables cook at different rates, in this recipe the carrots go in fifteen minutes after the potatoes do.

**STEAMED POTATOES
AND CARROTS WITH
TARRAGON BUTTER**

SERVES 4

- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh chives
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh tarragon
- Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper
- 1 pound very small Yukon gold or other small waxy potatoes
- 1 bunch carrots (about 6 medium), peeled

1. Stir together butter, parsley, chives, and tarragon in a small bowl until smooth.



Season with salt and pepper. Butter can be refrigerated, covered, up to 2 days.

2. Fill a medium pot fitted with a steamer insert with 2 to 3 inches water. Bring water to a simmer over medium-high heat. Add potatoes to insert; sprinkle with ¾ teaspoon salt, and cover. Reduce heat to medium-low. Steam until potatoes

are just tender, about 15 minutes. Add carrots; cover, and steam until vegetables are tender when pierced with a knife, about 5 minutes.

3. Transfer to a serving platter. Spoon about 2 tablespoons tarragon butter over vegetables. Serve immediately with remaining butter on the side.

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steamed crabmeat custards

Steaming is essential for gently heating the egg base of these Thai-inspired savory custards, which are laced with lemongrass and ginger. Serve them as first courses or light main courses with sliced toasted baguette (near left).

You can create a simple insert by lowering a round cooling rack into a pot. Here, the rack makes a stable stand with plenty of surface area to elevate the custards above the water (far left).



baby artichokes en papillote

Have guests unwrap these packets at the table; the paper will give way to a fragrant mix of baby artichokes, olives, and thyme sprigs (right). Aioli and lemon wedges make bright-flavored accompaniments.

Foods that are cooked in parchment are steamed right in the oven, not over water. The liquid in the packet—one you add or the ingredients' juices—turn to steam when heated and keep the foods moist as they cook.

SEE THE RECIPES SECTION FOR MORE
SEE THE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

