

# How to Cook Prime Rib Outdoors

Getting a deep, flavorful crust on this costly cut of meat can be a messy, smoky ordeal in the kitchen. How about taking it outside?

BY SARAH WILSON

Prime rib of beef is what I call special-occasion food: It's pricey, it's impressive, and it feeds a crowd. But there's another reason home cooks rarely splurge on this deluxe roast. To make the most of prime rib's superior marbling—the thin lines of intramuscular fat that flavor and tenderize as they melt away—most recipes call for long cooking at a low temperature. (Otherwise, the outermost sections overcook by the time the center reaches medium-rare.) The downside is a gray-brown exterior that's neither appealing nor flavorful.

In the test kitchen, we solve this problem by searing the roast on all sides quickly in a hot skillet before tossing it into a 250-degree oven. It's an effective method for getting a delicious charred crust without ruining the interior, but it's one that can be messy (sputtering grease), cumbersome (flipping a 7-pound roast with tongs), and a challenge to anything less than a state-of-the-art ventilation system (billowing smoke).

To make this project less daunting, I decided to take a crack at moving the proceedings outside. Not only would the grill make the smoke a moot issue, but perhaps I could harness that smoke to intensify the contrast between the crust and the meltingly tender interior.

## Taming the Flames

Given the test kitchen's success using the hybrid stovetop/oven method for prime rib, my plan was to translate the approach to the grill. With a hot fire on one side of the grill and the other side free of coals (a modified two-level fire), I mimicked the stovetop technique, searing the roast for 20 minutes on all surfaces, using tongs to stand it on each end to get the flat sides. Once the exterior was browned, I moved the roast to the cooler side of the grill and let it cook, covered, until the center reached medium-rare.

This first attempt was problematic, to say the least. I had a terrible time with flare-ups during



Beyond the well-charred, intensely smoky salt crust lies a generous slab of meltingly tender—and perfectly cooked—premium beef.

the searing process, as the roast's thick layer of fat rendered and dripped down onto the coals. And while the center of the roast reached a perfect medium-rare, the meat had a thick gray band around the perimeter (especially close to the cut sides), indicating that the roast had cooked at too high a temperature.

Had I been wrong about the high-heat sear? I tried placing the roast opposite the hot coals (without an initial sear), replacing the lid, and waiting. As the coals died down, the beef's temperature crept up to medium-rare (125 degrees) without developing an overcooked gray band. The downside was the crust. The two cut (flat) sides were adequately browned, but the fat-laden perimeter had an unappealing grayish look.

The answer was to combine the best ideas of each method. I clearly needed to spend some time searing the roast, but leaving the two cut sides unseared shaved 10 minutes from the process and avoided the awkward step of standing the roast up with tongs. What's more, reducing the time the roast spent directly over hot coals went a long way toward eliminating the over-

cooked gray bands. To minimize flare-ups while searing the fat-covered perimeter, I had the butcher trim the fat layer down to a thin  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch.

Many recipes call for cooking a rib roast on the bone, working from the idea that deeper flavor is developed this way. Here, though, tasters noticed little flavor advantage. (Given a rib roast's huge meat-to-bone ratio and the intense flavor imparted by a live fire, that's not so surprising.) However, the bones turned out to be more important as protection, keeping the underside from overbrowning. Unwilling to give up the convenience of a boneless roast (easier carving), I had my butcher remove the bones and then tie them back onto the meat with twine.

## Crust to Glory

Now that the interior was right, it was time to improve the crust. To achieve a greater contrast in flavor and texture, I experimented with coating the exterior with a generous layer of salt. When done right, a salt coating promotes crust development by drawing out moisture from just below the surface, letting it evaporate faster once the searing process begins.

Salting for just one hour did nothing, but salting for too long was a bigger problem: After six hours, the moisture had dissolved the exterior salt and started to carry it deep into the roast. While that's a trick the test kitchen has used in some recipes as an alternative to brining, with prime rib it delivered an unwelcome "cured" effect (think really, really expensive corned beef). Salting the roast for three hours (one hour in the fridge, two hours at room temperature) was just right.

What about other flavors? I tried a spice rub, but the spices were too strong for this deluxe cut. Much better were garlic and herbs, especially piney rosemary. But the real coup came when I tried adding a modest amount of smoke flavor with wood chunks. Although skeptics objected in principle ("Why treat a premium roast like a pork shoulder?"), one bite ended the controversy. The smoke flavor penetrated only about half an inch into this huge roast—basically, the outer crust—leaving the majority of the pink interior untainted.

Finally, I had dramatic contrast in flavor and



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- Recipes available until March 1, 2007.

texture: In every slice, there was a crunchy, salty crust, a thin layer of smokiness, and a generous expanse of pink, juicy premium beef. Not only was the flavor experience more intense using this grill-roasting method, but I had kept the smoke and mess out of the kitchen. I may never make prime rib indoors again.

### GRILL-ROASTED PRIME RIB FOR CHARCOAL GRILL

SERVES 6 TO 8

Your butcher can remove the bones and trim excess fat from the roast; just make sure that the bones are packed up along with the meat, as you need them to protect it from overbrowning. If the only roast you can find is boneless, fashion a protective “bone” from aluminum foil (see Kitchen Notes, page 30, for instructions). Letting the roast stand at room temperature for 2 hours prior to grilling helps it cook evenly. Serve the roast as is or with Horseradish Cream Sauce (see Cook’s Extra, page 6). For instructions on cooking a whole prime rib, also see Cook’s Extra, page 6.

- 1 first-cut (3- or 4-rib) beef standing rib roast (about 7 pounds), meat removed from bones, bones reserved, exterior fat trimmed to 1/8 inch
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- Ground black pepper
- 1/4 cup kosher salt
- Twine for tying roast, cut into four or six 2 1/2-foot lengths (depending on number of bones)
- 2 (3-inch) wood chunks
- Disposable aluminum roasting pan

1. Rub roast with oil and season generously with pepper. Spread salt on rimmed baking sheet; press roast into salt to coat evenly on all sides. Tie meat back onto bones exactly from where it was cut, passing two lengths of twine between each set of bones and knotting securely. Refrigerate

### SHOPPING: Locating the Prime Rib

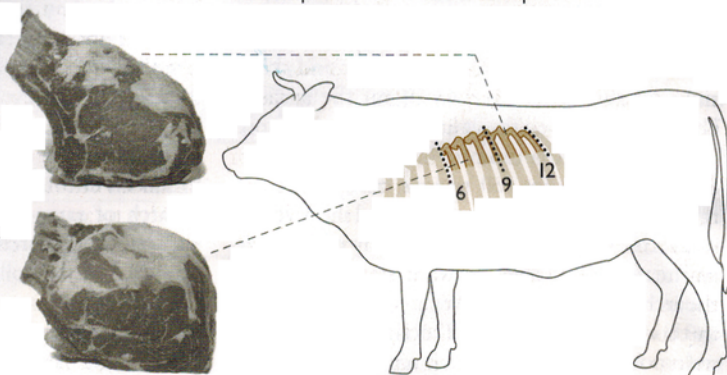
There are 13 beef ribs, numbered in ascending order from the front of the animal to the back. The first five ribs are the chuck section (1 through 5), the next seven are the rib section (6 through 12), and the 13th is part of the loin. Ribs 6 through 12, the rib section, are sold as prime rib. A seven-rib prime rib roast can weigh as much as 20 pounds, enough for at least 16 guests. For smaller crowds, butchers often divide the whole prime rib into two smaller portions.

#### FIRST CUT: OUR FAVORITE

The first-cut roast consists of ribs 10 through 12 (sometimes rib 9 is included, too). Its large center eye of meat and beefy flavor make this our preferred cut.

#### SECOND CUT: TOO GRISTLY

The second-cut roast consists of ribs 6 through 8 (sometimes rib 9 is included, too). Lots of flavor, but the additional fat and gristle make it less appealing.



roast, uncovered, for 1 hour, then let stand at room temperature 2 additional hours.

2. Meanwhile, soak wood chunks in water for 1 hour; drain. About 20 minutes before grilling, open top and bottom grill vents. Using chimney starter, ignite 4 quarts charcoal briquettes (about 60 coals) and burn until partially covered in thin, gray ash, about 15 minutes. Empty coals into grill; build modified two-level fire by arranging coals to cover one-half of grill. Place disposable roasting pan on empty side of grill. Position cooking grate over coals, cover grill, and heat until hot, about 5 minutes; scrape grate clean with grill brush.

3. Place roast on grate over hot side of grill and sear on fat-covered sides until well browned, turning as needed, 8 to 10 minutes total. (If flare-ups occur, move roast to cooler side of grill until flames die down.) When thoroughly browned, transfer roast to cooler side of grill, bone side down, with tips of bones pointed away from fire. Place soaked wood chunks on coals. Cover grill, positioning top vent over roast to draw smoke through grill. Grill-roast (do not remove lid for at least 1 1/2 hours) until instant-read thermometer inserted into center of roast reads 125 degrees for medium-rare, 2 to 2 1/2 hours.

4. Transfer roast to cutting board and let rest 20 minutes, lightly tented with foil. Remove strings and bones, cut into 1/2-inch-thick slices, and serve.

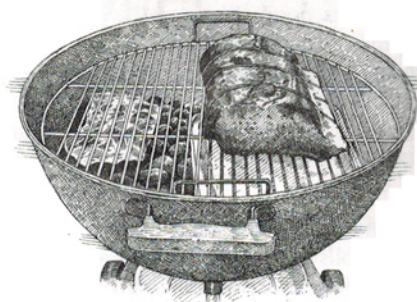
### GRILL-ROASTED PRIME RIB FOR GAS GRILL

1. Follow recipe for Grill-Roasted Prime Rib for Charcoal Grill through step 1.

2. Soak 2 cups wood chips in water for 30 minutes; drain. Place wood chips in small disposable aluminum pan; set aside. About 20 minutes before grilling, ignite grill, turn all burners to high, cover, and heat until very hot, about 15 minutes. Scrape grate clean with grill brush.

3. Continue with recipe from step 3, turning off all but primary burner (burner that will remain on during cooking), placing pan with wood chips

### TAMING THE GRILL'S HEAT



After searing the roast's fat-covered perimeter directly over the coals, transfer it to the cooler side, with the tips of the bones facing away from the fire.

on primary burner, and cooking with lid down once roast has been seared and positioned on cool side of grill as directed.

### GRILL-ROASTED PRIME RIB WITH GARLIC-ROSEMARY CRUST

Combine 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil, 1/4 cup minced garlic, and 1/4 cup minced fresh rosemary leaves in bowl. Follow recipe for Grill-Roasted Prime Rib, brushing paste onto roast after searing in step 3.

### TASTING: Is 'Prime' Prime Rib Worth a Premium?

“Prime” rib is something of a misnomer. Originally used to refer to the most desirable portions of the rib section, the term became somewhat confusing once the U.S. Department of Agriculture began using the label “Prime” as one of its beef-grading classifications. The grades classify the meat according to fat marbling and age—as well as by price. Prime is the best, followed by Choice and Select. Prime-grade prime rib costs about \$17 a pound, while Choice-grade prime rib goes for about \$13 a pound. Additionally, some butchers offer dry-aged prime rib—Prime-grade rib roasts that have been aged for up to a month to tenderize the meat and concentrate its flavors. Dry-aging adds another \$2 to \$3 to per pound.

To find out if Prime-grade prime rib is worth the premium, we cooked about \$1,500 worth of beef, including several Prime-grade, Choice-grade, and dry-aged rib roasts. In the entire lot, there were no outright losers, but the experiment was telling. First, we don't recommend spending the extra cash on dry-aging. Given the intense flavors imparted by the grill, any distinguishing nuances were lost. On the other hand, in most cases the Prime cuts beat out the Choice cuts in terms of superior marbling and, thus, superior flavor and texture. Given that this meal will be a splurge no matter how you slice it, springing for Prime beef makes sense, although a Choice roast will be almost as good. —S.W.

# KITCHEN NOTES

BY ERIKA BRUCE

## Fearless Flambé

Flambéing is more than just table-side theatrics: As dramatic as it looks, igniting alcohol actually helps develop a deeper, more complex flavor in sauces, thanks to flavor-boosting chemical reactions that occur only at the high temperatures reached in flambéing. But accomplishing this feat at home can be daunting. Here are some tips for successful—and safe—flambéing at home.

**Be prepared:** Turn off the exhaust fan, tie back long hair, and have a lid ready to smother dangerous flare-ups.

**Use the proper equipment:** A pan with flared sides (such as a skillet) rather than straight sides will allow more oxygen to mingle with the alcohol vapors, increasing the chance that you'll spark the desired flame. If possible, use long, wooden chimney matches, and light the alcohol with your arm extended to full length.

**Ignite warm alcohol:** If the alcohol becomes too hot, the vapors can rise to dangerous heights, causing large flare-ups once lit. Inversely, if the alcohol is too cold, there won't be enough vapors to light at all. We

found that heating alcohol to 100 degrees Fahrenheit (best achieved by adding alcohol to a pan off heat, then letting it heat for five to 10 seconds) produced the most moderate, yet long-burning flames.

**Light the alcohol off the heat:** If using a gas burner, be sure to turn off the flame to eliminate accidental ignitions near the side of the pan. Removing the pan from the heat also gives you more control over the alcohol's temperature.

**If a dangerous flare-up should occur:** Simply slide the lid over the top of the skillet (coming in from the side of, rather than over, the flames) to put out the fire quickly. Let the alcohol cool down and start again.

**If the alcohol won't light:** If the pan is full of other ingredients, the potency of the alcohol can be diminished as it becomes incorporated. For a more foolproof flame, ignite the alcohol in a separate small skillet or saucepan; once the flame has burned off, add the reduced alcohol to the remaining ingredients.

## Nature of the Yeast

Active dry yeast and rapid rise (instant) yeast may be similar in



## SLEEPER CELLS

When substituting active dry yeast (above) for rapid rise (below), it's important to compensate for the "dead weight" of the inactive yeast cells.

appearance and origins (both are dried forms of live yeast), but substituting one for the other will yield vastly different results. When we baked our American Sandwich Loaf (May/June 1996), Multigrain Bread (March/April 2006), and Best American Dinner Rolls (see page 9) using equal amounts of each, the active dry batches consistently took longer to rise after mixing and after shaping—by almost 50 percent—and baked up denser than the rapid rise batches. Why? These two forms of yeast have different degrees of potency owing to differences in processing: Active dry yeast is dried

at higher temperatures, which kills more of the exterior yeast cells (this yeast requires an initial activation in warm water), whereas rapid rise yeast is dried at more gentle temperatures (so it can be added directly to the dry ingredients).

What do you do if you have active dry in the cupboard and a recipe calls for rapid rise? Luckily, there's an easy fix: To compensate for the greater quantity of inactive yeast cells in the active dry yeast, simply use 25 percent more of it (for example, if the recipe calls for 1 teaspoon of instant yeast, use 1 1/4 teaspoons of active dry). The inverse holds true as well—use about 25 percent less rapid rise yeast in a recipe that calls for active dry. Also, don't forget to dissolve active dry yeast in a portion of the water from the recipe, heated to 105 degrees. Then let it stand for five minutes before adding it to the remaining wet ingredients. Skip this step if using instant yeast in recipes that call for active dry.

## Substituting Canned Tomatoes for Fresh

Nothing tastes better than juicy, fresh tomatoes—on the rare occa-

## 'This Isn't the Prime Rib I Asked For': Two Solutions

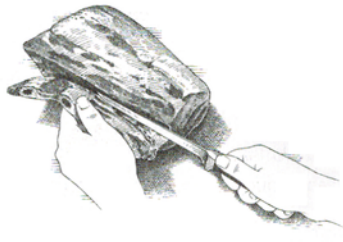
While we found it most convenient simply to ask our butcher to separate the meat from the bones for our Grill-Roasted Prime Rib (see page 7), every so often we were faced with doing the task ourselves. And, on a few occasions, we could find only boneless prime rib, leaving us with an overbrowned roast, thanks to the lack of protective bone. Should either of these scenarios ever present itself, here are the test kitchen's solutions.

**PROBLEM:** The butcher fails to cut the meat off the bone.

**SOLUTION:** Do it yourself.



1. Holding a meaty lobe in one hand and a sharp boning or chef's knife in the other, run the knife down the length of the first bone, following the contours as closely as possible, to separate it from the meat.



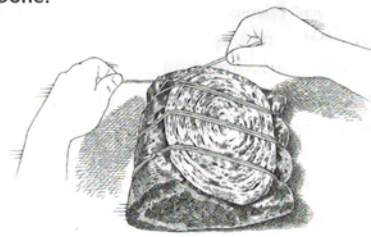
2. Flip the roast (so the uncut portion faces you). Holding the bones back with one hand, cut the meat from the remaining ribs. Once the meat is removed, proceed with seasoning and tying as directed in step 1 of the recipe.

**PROBLEM:** The prime rib comes with no bone.

**SOLUTION:** Fashion a makeshift "foil bone."



1. Fold a 12- to 14-foot sheet of aluminum foil in half lengthwise and then in half lengthwise again; gently roll and scrunch it into a narrow tube. Coil the foil tube into a tight disk about 6 inches across. Flatten to form a rectangle.



2. Tie the foil "bone" to the roast (where the real bones were removed) and proceed with the recipe.