

Various Ways of Tenderising Meats

Yvonne Maffei gets her teeth into the meaty topic of tenderising.

There's nothing worse than labouring over a recipe you're excited to present at your family dinner only to realise when everyone sits down at the table that the meat in your entrée is too difficult to cut. Silence falls as everyone tries to cut through the tough pieces and you're left to wonder what could have been done differently to make the meat more tender - cook it longer? Add a particular ingredient? Use a different type of pan?

In this segment of cooking school, we're going to discuss various ways you can make chicken, beef, goat and lamb a little more tender and much easier to eat, although many of the techniques will work on just about anything.

Why Tenderise Meats?

Meat from most animals, particularly those that are considered inexpensive such as chuck roast or shoulder, is made up of tough muscle fibres that are often difficult to break down. When not broken down enough during the cooking process, it results in meat that is tough, chewy and unappetising to eat.

Here are some of the most common ways to tenderise any meat, although take note that chicken may take less time to tenderise than red meats and some ingredients used to tenderise may do so more quickly than others.

Use a Mallet... or Something Similar

A meat mallet is basically a kitchen hammer. One side is flat and the other has pegs that can pierce the meat. Both sides are devised to help break down muscle fibres in the meat, depending on whether you want it flattened or punctured. Essentially, a mallet helps to "pre-chew" the fibres or break them up for you. This often works

well for stovetop cooking, but not so much for grilling as thinned out meat on such a high flame can burn quite easily. If you don't have a mallet, a heavy pan like a cast iron skillet works just the same - using the bottom side to pound, of course.

Simple Marinades from Common Ingredients

Meat fibres are broken down by coming into contact with something acidic and there are plenty of all natural ingredients that will do that. Choose from a list of acidic things like lemon juice, papayas, pineapple juice or kiwi fruit or try vinegar of any kind. Even buttermilk will help tenderise meats because it contains lactic acid. Depending on the recipe you're making and the flavour profile you're after, you can choose from any one of these and mix with a complementary oil such as olive oil or coconut oil to coat the meat while it marinates (except when using buttermilk).

Slow Cooking and Pressure Cooking

What if you don't want to marinate your meats or you're in a time crunch and need to get cooking? If you have the time, get out your slow cooker and wait for the meat to fall off the bone and become incredibly tender. You can even check it along the way to find a stopping point once it's cooked, depending on how 'tender' you want the meat to be. When you're in a hurry, pressure cooking is an ideal option because it quickly pushes the meat beyond being merely cooked to breaking its fibres down enough to force it past the stage of toughness no one wants on their plate. Cooking times will vary, of course, depending upon the amount and type of meat used.

There are so many ways to tenderise meats, no matter what you have in your refrigerator or pantry and how much time you have to get a meal on the table. With enough knowledge of your options, tenderising meat should never be 'tough' again!

