

COOKING

Crunch Time

COARSE BREAD CRUMBS ADD TASTE AND TEXTURE TO RUSTIC CUTLETS, PASTAS, AND GRATINS. **BY TONY ROSENFELD**



TOP THIS Spinach becomes special when it's cooked with a classic white sauce and Parmesan-flavored bread crumbs.

Bread crumbs are one of those bit players in the kitchen that are only noticeable when they're very good or very bad. The vast majority of crumbs available in the supermarket are of the latter category, flavorless and texturally challenged. Those fine, dustlike bits are best saved for dishes, like meatballs, in which the crumbs act as a binder. For adding crunch and flavor to a cutlet, gratin, or baked pasta – the sexier part of bread crumbs' job description – you're better off making them yourself. The rustic dishes will stave off the season's chill and offer, at last, a starring role for the bread crumb.

OVEN-“FRIED” CHICKEN CUTLETS WITH ROSEMARY BREAD CRUMBS

SERVES 4

- 4 small (5 to 6 ounces each) chicken breasts
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 3 cups homemade bread crumbs
- ¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and chopped (optional)
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 lemon, zest grated, cut into wedges

Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Have on hand a large (18 by 13 inches or similar) rimmed baking sheet with a large rack inserted into it. Lay the chicken breasts on a board and cut them in half, slicing parallel to the work surface. Pound the cutlets lightly with a mallet or the back of a heavy skillet to flatten them slightly. Sprinkle with the salt and pepper. Put the flour in a large, shallow bowl (pie plates work well), the eggs in another, and the bread crumbs in a third. To the bowl with the bread crumbs, add the Parmesan, capers if using, rosemary, and lemon zest and toss well.

Using tongs, dip a cutlet on both sides into the flour, and then into the eggs, coating evenly. Transfer the cutlet to the bread crumbs and, using your hands, press crumbs onto both sides of the chicken, making sure they stick. Transfer the cutlet to the rack on the baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining chicken. Bake the chicken until the crumbs brown uniformly and the meat is firm to the touch, 10 to 14 minutes; cut into a thicker piece to make sure it's cooked through. Serve immediately with the lemon wedges.

ROASTED COD WITH BASIL PESTO AND BREAD CRUMBS

SERVES 4

Use ripe tomatoes instead of sun-dried when they're in season.

- 2 pounds cod fillet, cut into 4 portions
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 3 cups loosely packed basil leaves
- ¼ cup pine nuts, lightly toasted
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- 4 oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained and thinly sliced
- 1½ cups bread crumbs

Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Brush the cod with 1 tablespoon of

the oil, sprinkle with ½ teaspoon of salt and the pepper, and set on a large (18 by 13 inches or similar) rimmed baking sheet lined with aluminum foil. In a food processor, combine the basil, pine nuts, garlic, and remaining ¼ teaspoon of salt. With the feed tube open, process while pouring in the remaining 3 tablespoons of oil in a thin stream, to make a paste, about 30 seconds. Spoon the pesto on top of the fish, and sprinkle with the sun-dried tomatoes and then the bread crumbs.

Bake the cod until it is opaque all the way through and just firm to the touch, 10 to 14 minutes. Serve immediately.

SPINACH GRATIN WITH PARMESAN BREAD CRUMBS

SERVES 4 TO 6

To speed up this classic side dish, do without the traditional white sauce and instead use 3 tablespoons of heavy cream. And to add color or substance, layer slices of cooked butternut squash or potato in with the spinach.

- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter

- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1¼ cups whole milk
- ¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to taste
- ¼ teaspoon pepper, plus more to taste
- Pinch grated nutmeg
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1½ pounds spinach, large stems removed
- 1½ cups bread crumbs
- 1 teaspoon chopped thyme

Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Grease a medium (1½ quart) baking dish.

Melt 2 tablespoons of butter in a small saucepan. Add the flour and cook, stirring, until the mixture turns a light golden brown, about 2 minutes. Add the milk and bring to a simmer, whisking occasionally, until it thickens. Stir in ¾ cup of Parmesan, ½ teaspoon of salt, ¼ teaspoon of pepper, and the nutmeg.

Meanwhile, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter in a large (12 inch) skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook until it starts to sizzle and brown around the edges, about 2 minutes. Raise the heat to medium high, add the spinach (you may have to wait for some of the greens to wilt before it will all fit), sprinkle with the remaining ½ teaspoon of salt and cook, flipping the spinach with tongs, until it softens, about 3 minutes. Let cool for a couple of minutes, then coarsely chop and, using your hands, squeeze out any excess liquid.

Return the spinach to the skillet, stir in the white sauce, toss well, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to the baking dish. In a medium bowl, toss the bread crumbs with the remaining ¾ cup of Parmesan and the thyme and sprinkle over the spinach. You can make the dish to this point and let sit at room temperature for up to 1 hour before baking.

Bake until the liquid bubbles around the sides of the dish and the crumbs turn a uniform light brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve immediately.

Tony Rosenfeld is author of 150 Things to Make With Roast Chicken. Send comments to cooking@globe.com.

KITCHEN AIDE

Easy Bread Crumbs

This recipe yields about 3½ cups, but I like to make a double batch (to do so, use 2 pans), store the crumbs in a zipper bag in the freezer, and add them to stew, soup, and pasta. You can use most any bread, but I prefer dense country loaves.

- ¾ pound bread, crusts left on and cut into large cubes
- 3 tablespoons olive oil or melted unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt

Add half of the bread cubes to a food processor and pulse until they become coarse crumbs about the size of peas (many crumbs will be slightly smaller). Repeat with the remaining bread and transfer to a large bowl. Toss with the oil or butter and salt.

Transfer the bread crumbs to a large (about 12 inches), heavy-based skillet and cook over medium heat, tossing often, until they start to color and become crisp, about 6 minutes. Reduce the heat

to medium low and cook until the bread crumbs dry out and become a uniform light golden brown, about 8 minutes. Transfer to a large (18 by 13 inches or similar) baking sheet and cool to room temperature. Store in a zipper bag in the freezer for up to a month. – T.R.

