

Bacon Keeps On Sizzling

People often state that bacon makes everything better. Bacon imparts flavor to innumerable dishes. This ancient, cured meat now appears in such modern forms as shelf-stable or refrigerated fully cooked strips, bacon made from turkey and/or beef, and meats certified as organic.

Now it's time to learn more about what makes bacon sizzle.

Bacon is a pork product. It's often made from pork belly, but it can also be made from pork back. Pork bacon, without any other descriptors, is raw or uncooked and must be cooked before eating. Most bacon sold in the United States is "streaky" bacon, long, narrow slices cut crosswise from the hog belly that contains veins of pink meat within white fat.

When searching for bacon to purchase, you will see the words "cured" and "uncured" on the label. Curing is a process used to preserve food. All bacon must be cured before consumption. Cured bacon is bacon that has been preserved with a combination of salt, sodium, and nitrates. Bacon has been cured in one of two ways: dry or wet. A dry cure is the superior method of curing. Pork is rubbed with salt, seasonings, nitrates, and, in some cases, sugar. The meat is then left to cure for one to two weeks. A wet cure involves steeping the meat in a saltwater brine or injecting the brine into the meat to increase its weight and volume. Wet-cured bacon won't be as crisp as dry-cured bacon.

Now that I've discussed cured bacon, you may be wondering how bacon can be made without curing? Uncured bacon is cured with natural nitrates found in celery, beets, and other veggies. When the vegetables are combined with seasonings and salt, they create a bacon cure that's free of artificial chemicals.

Bacon is sold both smoked or unsmoked. If the bacon is labeled "hardwood smoked" or "naturally smoked," it means that it was placed in a smoker. If the bacon you purchase has a smoky flavor without these labels, it was likely injected with liquid smoke to speed up the preservation process. Unsmoked bacon is cured and dried without the signature smoky taste.

Packaged, raw sliced bacon can be stored in its unopened, vacuum-sealed package in the refrigerator for up to a week past the expiration date. Once opened, keep it tightly wrapped in foil or a zip-top bag and use it within one week. Sealed packages of raw bacon can be frozen for up to one month.

Cooked bacon should be sealed in a plastic bag and stored in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. You can also freeze cooked bacon in paper towel-wrapped individual portions in a zip-top bag for up to six weeks.

Have you considered adding seasonings or flavorings to bacon? You can make it sweeter or spicier by adding herbs, seasonings, or sugar. No matter which ingredients you choose, simply dust or slather them over your bacon, then start cooking.

My favorite way to cook bacon is in the oven. Place bacon on a parchment or foil-lined baking sheet and put it in a cold oven. Then, heat the oven to 400°F and bake for 18 to 25 minutes, or until the desired crispness is achieved. There's no need to turn it, but you'll have to drain the cooked bacon on paper towels before serving.

Bacon is high in salt and saturated fat, both of which should be limited to decrease the risk of heart disease. Consider low-sodium and lean bacon varieties. Three slices of bacon have about 161 calories. Enjoy bacon in very moderate portions, and keep your diet filled with healthy vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, and whole grains.

Bacon is a wonderfully versatile ingredient that provides a fantastic dimension to everything it is included in.