

Tastes

IN THE KITCHEN
with Sam Gugino

No Cooking? No Sweat



When the heat and humidity are in a race to see which gets to 90 first, I cool my jets. No stove, no oven. Not even the grill. I want to stay inside, turn up the air conditioning and forget about cooking. So I turn to steak tartare, tuna carpaccio and panzanella, an Italian bread salad.

I might also want to chill out when eating out. At T.W. Food restaurant in Cambridge, Mass., chef and owner Tim Wiechmann makes a “surf and turf” tartare of wild striped bass belly and pasture-raised veal filet mignon served in a Martini glass with cold curry-and-oregano soup poured over it. “I buy whole animals and whole fish, so I’m always looking for ways to use up all the parts,” Wiechmann says. I tried making the dish at home, and it tasted a lot better than it sounded.

Most traditional tartare recipes call for ground beef, usually steak. In one of his recipes, legendary gastronome James Beard even called for the meat to be ground twice. However, many chefs today avoid ground meat and prefer instead to chop a piece of beef by hand into very small cubes of less than a quarter inch each. “You want texture, not sausage meat,” Wiechmann explains. Also, ground meat that’s available for purchase is more susceptible to *E. coli* bacteria, and the longer it sits around, the more moisture it loses.

If you insist on using ground meat, buy a piece of beef and grind it yourself, or have the butcher grind it fresh for you. The cut of beef should be tender and relatively lean; filet mignon is ideal. Next best is top sirloin, followed by top or bottom round. Typical steak tartare seasonings include minced anchovy and onion (I prefer sweet onions), Dijon mustard, raw or cooked egg yolks, and capers. You could also add lemon juice, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauce. Be careful not to overmix the ingredients or the meat will toughen. To serve, form the meat into a large patty, garnish it with chopped parsley, and offer rye or pumpernickel bread as an accompaniment.

I had veal tartare twice while visiting Piedmont, Italy, a few years ago and loved this local favorite both times. Because veal is more delicate, the seasonings should be more restrained—

lemon, olive oil and perhaps a shaving of fresh white truffle should be enough.

Tuna and salmon are the quintessential fish for seafood tartare. Because fish is more tender than beef, it can be cut into slightly larger cubes. Seasonings often take an Asian direction, with fresh, chopped cilantro, scallion, mild chile pepper, lime juice and sesame oil. Or the fish can be prepared Mediterranean-style, with olive oil, lemon juice and parsley.

Carpaccio, invented at Harry’s Bar in Venice, Italy, was originally made with slices of beef from cuts similar to those for tartare. Pounded thin and spread on a plate, the meat was drizzled with mayonnaise thinned with Worcestershire, lemon juice and milk; sometimes mustard was added. Other popular toppings for



Beef carpaccio is a perfect hot-weather dish that can be made without heating up the kitchen. The original dressing of thinned mayonnaise has been edged out by olive oil, lemon and Parmigiano.

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carpaccio include olive oil, lemon juice, shaved Parmigiano and shaved truffle or mushroom.

These days, carpaccio can be made out of almost anything, from venison to zucchini, but seafood carpaccio, typically made with tuna or salmon, is the most common. Because fish is more delicate than beef, take care when pounding it thin. Lemon juice and olive oil form the base of the dressing. Instead of cheese shavings, try shaved fennel, radish or cucumber. An Asian-style presentation could include soy sauce, sesame oil, grated ginger and shaved daikon radish.

We can thank the Swedes for gravlax, cured salmon with a texture that's somewhere between sashimi and lox. Traditionally, it's made by seasoning the flesh of two center-cut salmon fillets with kosher salt and sugar, then sandwiching a large bunch of fresh dill between the fillets. The whole thing is weighted down and refrigerated for two to three days (and turned every 12 hours for basting in its own juice).

If you don't want to wait that long, Isaac Miller, chef at 231 Ellsworth restaurant in San Mateo, Calif., has a faster method that still yields delicious results. He covers a 12-ounce wild salmon fillet with a lot more kosher salt—a whole pound of it—which cuts the curing process to about two hours. Then he rinses off the salt and marinates the salmon in sake for another two hours. "I tried this out one day at the recommendation of a sushi chef," Miller says. "I like the way the salmon and sake play off each other."

Seviche is even faster to make—just cure raw fish with some salt and citrus juice. Lime juice is customarily used to "cook" the flesh with its acidity, but any citrus juice will work. Don't marinate it longer than two hours, however, or the fish will become "overcooked" and have a chalky texture. Fish properly prepared should have a firm exterior and tender interior.

Seviche offers more seafood options than gravlax, tartare or carpaccio do. While some chefs prefer using fatty fish such as mackerel and bluefish, I like white-fleshed fish such as flounder and snapper. Tuna also makes a good seviche, as do shellfish such as wild shrimp and sea scallops (my favorite). Since seviche has

South American roots—Ecuador and Peru both claim paternity—seasonings such as chile pepper, cilantro, lime and olive oil are appropriate. You can also mix seviche with fruits such as mangos, avocados and tomatoes.

When making any sort of raw fish or meat dish, "you have to have the freshest and best ingredients," advises John Caputo, chef at A Mano trattoria in Chicago. Caputo makes a fusion no-cook dish of sashimi tuna with celery-lemon salsa (sashimi is akin to carpaccio but not as thin).

Vegetarians who don't feel like cooking can whip up some pan-

zanella, the Tuscan bread salad. This is a good way to use left-over bread and take advantage of summer produce such as tomatoes, especially those that are too ripe for other dishes. Squeeze the tomatoes of their juice (reserve the liquid), cut them into wedges and combine them with sliced cucumber, sweet onion, capers, black olives, ribbons of basil leaves and cubed country bread. You can also briefly soak the bread in water, squeeze it dry and pull it into chunks.

The reserved tomato juice should be combined with olive oil and red-wine vinegar for the dressing. This salad may also contain celery ribs or leaves and raw or roasted red bell peppers. The addition of canned tuna packed in olive oil makes it a more substantial main course.

Fattoush is a Lebanese bread salad made with broken pieces of dried—usually grilled—pita bread, tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet or green onions, parsley or cilantro, and Romaine lettuce. The salad is dressed with olive oil and lemon juice, and mint and radishes may be added.

If you do decide to venture outside, perhaps for a picnic, I can't think of a better dish to bring along than the marinated cheese with olives and garlic from Alice Waters' *Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook* (Random House).

Waters uses whole garlic cloves cooked gently in olive oil, but for a no-cook meal, just smash them with the side of a knife and combine them with small goat-cheese rounds, black olives, bay leaves and enough olive oil to cover. Refrigerate overnight, and take it out an hour before you need it. Discard the garlic and bay leaves and serve with French sourdough bread.

Not cooking can be as fun and rewarding as cooking. And it's a whole lot cooler.

Contributing editor Sam Gugino has been writing for Wine Spectator since 1994, becoming a regular columnist in 1996.



Tim Wiechmann and his wife, Bronwyn, run T.W. Food in Cambridge, Mass., where he serves a surf and turf tartare of striped bass and veal with curry soup.

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