

Brining is a great way to add flavor and tenderness to many meats and some seafood. It's very easy to do. Even though it adds preparation time, it is a "no work" period that gives you lots of bang for the added time.

The brining technique I am talking about is not for preserving. It's also not as heavy a flavoring as "corning" we talked about recently. It's mild and magic. What's happening is that you are adding "juiciness" to the meat.

Leaner white meats benefit the most from brining. Things like chicken and turkey are perfect. Brining produces the best pork chops ever. Shrimp benefit greatly from brief brining. Anything you put in a smoker is much better after brining.

Basic brining is done with water and salt. The addition of sugar adds an important part to the solution, too. Other than that, all sorts of aromatics add to the complexity of the brining liquid.

Here's a very brief description of how it works. The brining liquid is absorbed into the meat. This obviously adds moisture. The flavor is a bonus. Also the process breaks down some of the proteins causing a "tenderizing" effect.

Now we can get to the fun stuff. The best way to make a safe brining liquid is to boil and cool it. If your brine time is less than an hour, don't bother. If the time is a day or more, make sure you do it. In between is your choice.

A very important thing to remember is never re-use brining liquid. In fact don't use it for anything – not even a sauce. Throw it out.

The basic brining formula I like is ½ cup Kosher salt, ¼ cup sugar and 2 quarts water. That's it. Anything else is extra.

It's important to not use regular iodized table salt. It will give your brine an off flavor. Use Kosher salt. If you use Morton's, follow the ratio above. If you have Diamond Crystal, use a little more by volume. These salt crystals are larger and more is needed.

Bring 1 quart of water to a boil and stir in the salt and sugar. Once there are completely dissolved, remove from the heat. Add in the other quart of cold water and let the mixture cool. You can substitute 2 quarts of ice for that last quart of water to get you going quicker.

Place your meat in a container large enough to hold the meat and have room for the liquid to freely surround and cover it. It's important that the meat be completely covered. The brine will make a bacterial seal that needs to not be broken if you are brining overnight.

If your meat won't stay covered, weight in down with a plate. That will do the trick. Then you can cover the entire container.

An alternative here is a large plastic bag. Place the meat in the bag and pour in the brine. Make sure to sit the bag in a container in the fridge. A leaky bag makes for clean up on aisle three.

If you are going for big stuff like a turkey, then turn to a cooler. It's big. It's insulated. It's perfect. A cooler is also a great place to thaw the turkey too.

Now that you know how to brine, let your creative juices get involved. The liquid you use doesn't have to be water. You can use wine, beer or juices. You can even use some vinegar to flavor your water. You have to be careful though because these liquids are acidic. The acids will quickly begin to break down the meat fibers. So thinner pieces of meat can turn mushy while holding in the liquid.

For something like apple or orange juice, just substitute them for half to all of the water. You can also substitute stock for the water. Vegetable stock adds great flavor.

Your creativity can also expand by using aromatics. Open your spice cabinet and find bay leaves, peppercorns and herbs. Garlic and onion are candidates. If you like certain seasonings with a particular meat, add them to your brine. You will like the finished product even better.

Any seasoning should be added to the hot liquid before cooling. In fact letting the aromatics simmer a while will serve to bring out their flavor. Just remember to adjust your brining time according to the strength of the seasoned liquid.

OK what are we going to brine? I always sit my shrimp in a saltwater solution for 15 to 30 minutes before cooking. I don't use sugar. Half an hour is the max you should do.

As for fish, care must be taken. Brining works best on fat fish like salmon. Brining a side of salmon before roasting works great.

According to the thickness, pork chops should be brined for 1 to 4 hours. Add some rosemary and garlic to your regular brine formula and you will be very happy with how moist and tender your chops are. Just dry the surface and use your favorite recipe.

Chicken pieces can be treated the same. Brined and then fried chicken is absolutely the best. You can substitute buttermilk for the water and don't bother boiling.

In either of these cases you can let your meat sit overnight. Just make sure your brine is not too strong.

Whole chickens and pork loins and are also perfect candidates. Let them sit overnight and use in your recipe. There is no better roasted chicken than one that been brined. That turkey is going to need a couple of days in brine.

A special note – look carefully at the package on chicken. Some chicken has water added already – as much as 10% of the weight. It's nice to sell water for a buck a pound. These won't work well for brining.

Fatty cuts of meat and red meat don't benefit much from brining. There's already fat running through the tissue that will provide moisture.

The exception is simply whatever goes in your smoker benefits greatly from brining. Yes it adds flavor. But what it does for moisture in what can be a dry process is wonderful. This is where that brined salmon will shine.

Ditto for meat you grill – especially long cooked items. That Boston butt will be better after brining.

Try brining some meat as you hit the grill this spring. You will have the best chicken and pork in your neighborhood. And I won't tell anyone your secret.