

Trimming and Tying Meat and Poultry

A few simple butcher's tricks will make your meats and poultry look and taste their very best. BY MATTHEW CARD

TRIMMING BASICS

Our two favorite knives for cutting meat are a standard 8-inch chef's knife and a thin-bladed, flexible boning knife that can negotiate the tight spots a chef's knife cannot. (For our rating of leading boning knives, see "Choosing a Boning Knife" on page 17). For some cuts, either knife will suffice, but some tasks, such as removing chicken cutlets from the breast, require the dexterity of a boning knife.

Before trimming meat or poultry, make sure that your knives are sharp. Dull knives are dangerous and will make sloppy, imprecise cuts. We usually sharpen our knives just before cutting meat. If we are doing a lot of cutting, we re-steel our knives halfway through the job to ensure a keen edge and consistent cuts from beginning to end.

In another nod to safety, it is a good practice to dry the meat or poultry with paper towels prior to trimming. A good drying will keep it from slipping about on the cutting board.

Trimming Beef or Pork Tenderloin

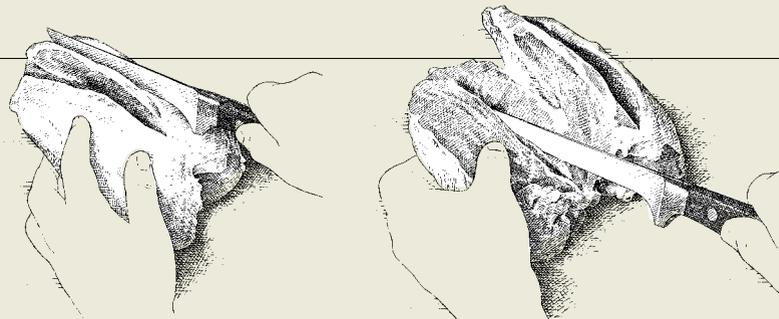
While we generally purchase whole beef tenderloins already trimmed, uncleaned tenderloins are often available for steeply discounted prices. While most cooks know to remove the white, opaque fat encasing the meat, the silver skin—the shiny, fibrous connective tissue beneath the fat—must also come off because it toughens and shrinks as it cooks, making for a misshapen, unevenly cooked roast. A pork tenderloin (shown below) is always sold with the thin, membranous silver skin attached, but it is quick work to remove it with the same technique used for the beef tenderloin.



After cutting off the extraneous fat, slip the tip of a boning knife underneath the silver skin, angle it slightly upward, and, using a gentle sawing motion, cut the silver skin from the roast, keeping it taut against the knife's blade. Repeat the process until you have removed the silver skin from the entire roast.

Trimming Cutlets from a Whole Chicken Breast

You can save money by slicing your own cutlets from a whole chicken breast instead of purchasing boneless, skinless cutlets.

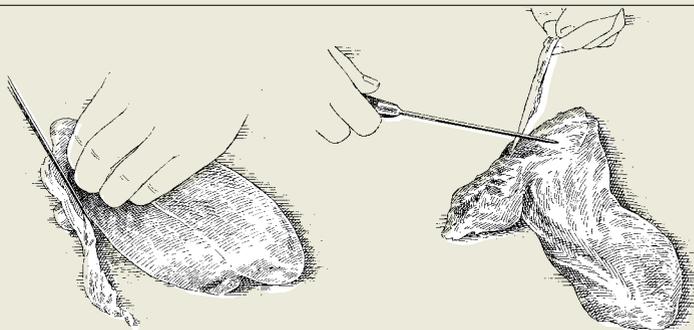


1. Using a boning knife, cut along both sides of the breastbone, starting at the tail end, following the rib cage down, and separating the meat from the bone.

2. Expose the wing joint and cut underneath the joint to free the breast half from the rib cage. Repeat on the other side of the breastbone.

Trimming Fat and Tendons from Chicken Cutlets

Boneless, skinless chicken breasts are appealing for many reasons, including the fact that they are recipe-ready. Well, almost. It is well worth taking an extra minute or two to trim them of excess fat and the tough tendon running down the center of the tenderloin.

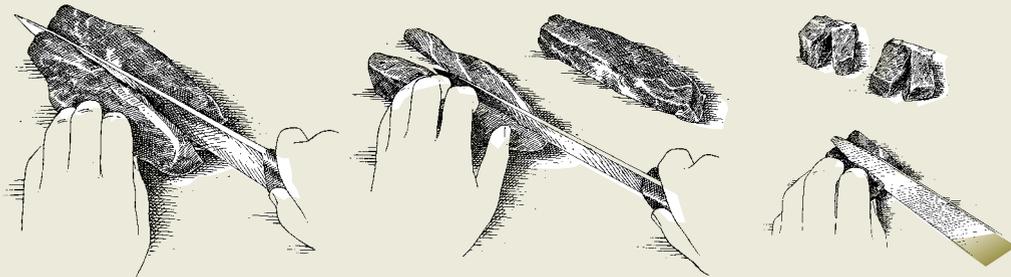


1. Place each cutlet tenderloin-side down (the tenderloin is that floppy, thin piece of meat attached to the breast), and smooth the top with your fingers. Any yellow fat will slide to the periphery, where it can be trimmed away.

2. To remove the tough, white tendon, turn the cutlet tenderloin-side up and peel back the thick half of the tenderloin so it lies top-down on the work surface. Use the point of a paring or boning knife to cut around the tip of the tendon to expose it, then scrape the tendon free with the knife.

Trimming Meat for Kebabs

Because of its heavy marbling, rich flavor, and low price, top blade steak is our favorite cut for beef kebabs. However, there is a thick ribbon of gristle running through the steak that must be removed. Once the gristle is excised, the two halves are easily cubed. Large cubes are harder to overcook than small cubes, but they do not readily absorb a marinade's flavor. We found that butterflying large cubes allows the flavor of the marinade to penetrate the meat more deeply. After marinating, the meat is skewered as if it were still one large cube.



1. Halve the steak, leaving the gristle attached to one side.

2. Cut the gristle away from the half to which it is still attached.

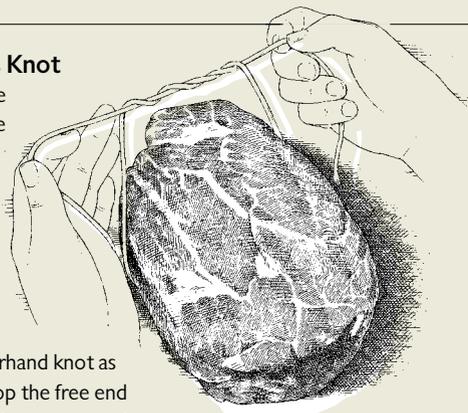
3. Cut the meat into 1¼-inch cubes, then cut each cube almost through at the center to butterfly it.

TYING BASICS

Tying cuts of meat keeps them compact and ensures even cooking. While we prefer butcher's twine because it is thick and easy to work with, any kitchen twine will do the job in a pinch. Make sure to use all-natural cotton or linen twine, which won't taint the meat or burn in the oven.

Tying a Butcher's Knot

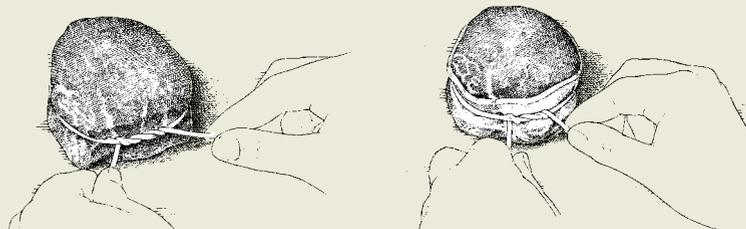
This basic knot can be made without a spare finger to hold the string in place.



Begin by tying an overhand knot as if tying a bow, but loop the free end around the other end once more, then pull the ends to tighten the twine around the meat.

Tying Medallions and Other Steaks

Round, boneless steaks such as tenderloin and rib-eye will hold their shape better during cooking if tied first. A slice of bacon can be wrapped around lean cuts of beef before they are tied. We also like to bind veal and lamb shanks before cooking so that the meat remains attached to the bone.



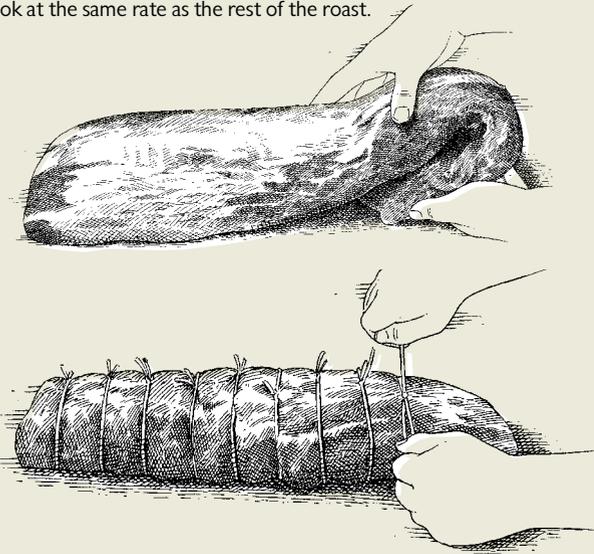
Wrap a 12-inch piece of twine firmly around the steak's circumference and secure it with a butcher's knot. If using bacon, wrap it around the steak before the twine.

Tying a Beef Tenderloin

Because the tenderloin narrows at one end, the thin portion must be tucked under itself and tied so that it will cook at the same rate as the rest of the roast.

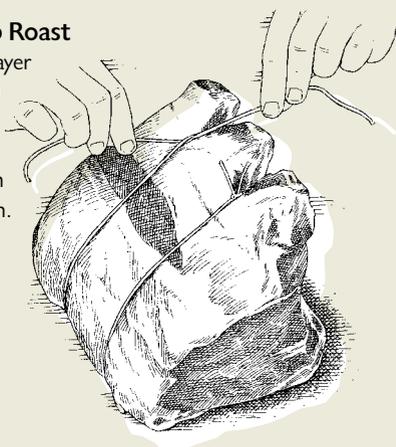
1. Tuck the skinny end portion, about the last 6 inches, underneath the tenderloin and secure with a 12-inch length of twine.

2. Tie off the rest of the roast at 1½-inch intervals. The twine should be tied firmly but not too tight, in which case it will squeeze out the meat's juices.



Tying a Standing Rib Roast

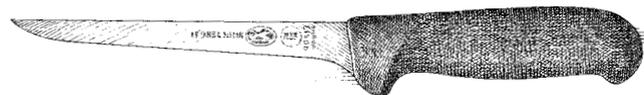
If left untied, the outer layer of meat on a standing rib roast tends to separate from the rib-eye muscle as it cooks, making for an unappealing presentation. The solution is easy: Tie a piece of twine around both ends of the roast, running the twine between the bones.



TESTING EQUIPMENT: CHOOSING A BONING KNIFE

The slim, flexible blade of a boning knife may look eccentric, but it is perfectly designed to slide nimbly through joints, between bones, and under silver skin. It is an essential tool for such tasks as removing cutlets from a whole chicken breast and can also be used to remove fat and silver skin (see illustrations on page 16).

Because most home cooks are likely to use a boning knife infrequently, we wondered if a cheaper knife would do. To find out, we tested six leading knives with blades between 5 and 7 inches long and prices between \$9 and \$71. Both large- and small-handed testers used each knife to butcher a whole chicken and to trim beef ribs of fat and silver skin. Each knife was evaluated for handle comfort, slipperiness (hands become very greasy when butchering), agility (including flexibility), and sharpness.



Best Boning Knife

An extremely narrow blade makes the Forschner Fibrox especially agile.

The winning Forschner Fibrox, priced at \$18, received high marks for its uniquely designed ergonomic handle as well as its slim, highly maneuverable blade and razor-sharp edge. The plastic handle nestled comfortably into both large and small hands, and it stayed there even when our hands became slick with fat. The blade was the narrowest of the lot, which made it very agile. And while all the knives arrived with razor-sharp edges, the Forschner seemed exceptionally keen, gliding effortlessly through tough tendon and thick skin.

TESTERS' COMMENTS ON THE KNIVES (listed in order of preference)

➤ Forschner (Victorinox) Fibrox: \$17.90

COMMENTS: Comfortable, "easy-to-grip" handle and narrow blade impressed all comers. "Great flexibility around bones." "Amazing" sharpness out of the box.

➤ J. A. Henckels Professional S: \$49.99

COMMENTS: Finished a close second with a blade "nearly as agile as the Forschner" but lost points for its "slippery" handle.

➤ Wüsthof-Trident Grand Prix: \$54

COMMENTS: Handle fit "like a glove" but turned slippery when coated in chicken fat. "Fiendishly sharp" blade is wider than most and not as agile as the top choices.

➤ Global: \$70.99

COMMENTS: The textured metal handle received very mixed reviews. The narrowness of the bolster (the piece of metal couched between the blade and the handle) felt "dangerous," although the blade was "quite agile."

➤ Chicago Cutlery: \$14.99

COMMENTS: Testers complained that the handle felt "boxy" and the long blade was "hard to control."

➤ Farberware Professional: \$8.99

COMMENTS: Very awkward, ill-designed handle fit neither large nor small hands. The blade felt "flimsy" during use.