

Select Solutions

The Basics

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sausage

Do you yearn for something easy to prepare that cooks in minutes, is exceptionally tasty, makes a healthy meal, and won't bust your daily fat-content budget? Chef Bruce Aidells suggests sausage, the original fast food. According to Aidells, people have been preparing quick meals with it for more than 4,500 years. In fact, the ancient Egyptians munched on sausage while building the pyramids. Here, Aidells shares his knowledge of sausage—how to purchase, store, and cook it.

How are sausages made?

Sausages were originally filled with salted scraps of leftover meat; the word sausage comes from the Latin word *salsus*, meaning salted. Today you can find sausages made from pork, beef, veal, lamb, poultry, and even tofu.

Meat fillings are coarsely or finely ground or puréed (as is the case with hot dogs and bologna), depending on the preference of the sausage maker. The filling is then mixed with a variety of seasonings—fresh or dried herbs, vegetables, or fruit—to give a unique flavor.

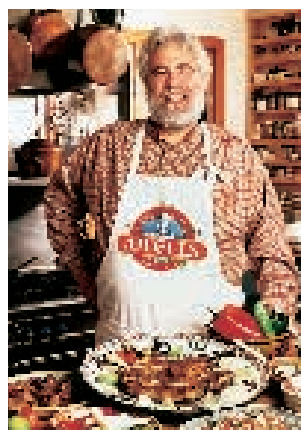
Most specialty gourmet sausage makers choose to stuff their fillings into natural edible casings made from hog or

sheep intestines. I use natural casings like these for my sausages because I think they give a better mouth-feel than synthetic casings made from edible collagen.

After the casings are filled, the sausages are either sold raw, or steamed, smoked, or dried and sold as cooked. Dried sausage is made by salting it and then fermenting it in a heated environment.

How do you classify sausages?

In general, sausages are classified as either raw or fully cooked. The raw category includes any sausage that has raw filling and must be fully cooked before eating, like Mexican chorizo sausage. Raw



sausage can also be purchased in bulk, without casings.

The fully cooked sausage category includes steamed sausages like German bratwurst, smoked sausages like German braunschweiger (smoked liver sausage), and



THIS FAST PASTA DISH (ABOVE) GETS A BOOST FROM SEASONED SAUSAGE. BELOW LEFT, AIDELLS TAKES PRIDE IN A NEW RECIPE.

dried sausages like Italian pepperoni.

Sausages are also sometimes classified by meat types (pork, beef, or poultry). Manufacturers may classify sausages by usage (breakfast versus dinner) or by price point or customer group (high end or premium versus mass market).

What should we look for when purchasing sausages?

If the sausages are vacuum-packed, always check the expiration date to make sure they are still fresh. If you are purchasing fresh, loose sausages, make sure they are smooth, evenly colored, and not sticky



to the touch. Dried sausages should be firm and covered with a white bloom.

If you're purchasing low-fat sausages, they should still have around 13 percent fat per link; if the fat is reduced too much, the flavor and texture of the sausage will be compromised.

What is the best way to store sausages?

If you buy sausages in a vacuum pack and don't take them out, you can keep them in the refrigerator for a couple of weeks. Once you open up a vacuum pack, cooked sausages should be used within five days, and raw sausages should be used within two days, or frozen.

Freezing doesn't have much of an impact on the flavor. You can freeze raw or cooked sausages for three to four

months, if they are stored in airtight wrapping and the freezer is maintained at a temperature around 0°. Whole dried sausages can be stored for up to three months in a cool, dry place.

Can you give us some sausage preparation and cooking tips?

- Don't pierce sausages before cooking them because it causes the juices to run out, which makes them dry.
- To prevent exploding sausages, don't grill or cook them on a super-high flame. Even if you use low heat, they can burst. You can't always prevent it from happening.
- If a recipe calls for sautéing fresh sausage for a sauce or stew, it is easier to work with raw sausage squeezed out of the casing rather than whole

fresh sausages in the casings.

- Don't peel the casing off a precooked sausage. All casings are edible, so if you're going to chop a fully cooked sausage into small pieces before using it in a recipe, leave the casing on.
- To flavor soup with sausage do it in two steps: First, put in a small amount in the early stage of cooking to help flavor the whole soup. Those sausage pieces will lose their flavor; it leaches into the broth. Then, mix the remaining sausage into the soup just before serving and cook for a few minutes to warm it. Those sausage pieces will have their full flavor when you bite into them.
- Before grilling, it is a good idea to poach raw sausages in boiling water for a few minutes. When you poach them you don't have to fully cook them, just get the center hot enough so when you transfer them to the grill, the hot coals don't burn the sausages outside while leaving them raw on the inside. Fully cooked sausages can go directly on the grill without poaching.

SAUSAGE WITH FRESH TOMATO AND BASIL SAUCE OVER FRESH PASTA

PREP AND COOK TIME: About 35 minutes

NOTES: This recipe is adapted from Aidells' latest book, *The Complete Meat Cookbook*. Accompany this low-fat dish with a Chianti Classico or a medium-bodied California Zinfandel.

MAKES: 4 to 6 servings

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound precooked (smoked) sun-dried tomato or other poultry sausages, sliced

- 3 large garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 cups peeled, seeded, and diced fresh, vine-ripened tomatoes or canned Italian-style plum tomatoes in their juice
- 8 large fresh basil leaves, cut into thin strips
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 pound fresh fettuccine
- Freshly grated parmesan cheese

1. In a heavy nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Brown sausages for 1½ minutes on each side; remove from pan and set aside.
2. Turn the heat down to medium and add garlic to pan. Cook until garlic is fragrant and soft, but not brown, 1 to 2 minutes.
3. Add the tomatoes and basil and cook for about 5 minutes, scraping up any browned bits from the pan bottom. Return sausage to pan and cook for 3 minutes more. Add salt and pepper to taste.
4. Meanwhile, cook pasta according to package directions; drain.
5. Add cooked, drained pasta to sausage and sauce. Over medium-high heat, toss pasta until it is well coated with sauce. Put pasta and sausage in a shallow bowl to serve; garnish with parmesan.

Per serving: 374 cal., 30% (112 cal.) from fat; 20 g protein; 12 g fat (3.4 g sat.); 45 g carbo (2.5 g fiber); 442 mg sodium; 103 mg chol.

CHEF BRUCE AIDELLS has been making gourmet sausages for more than 20 years. To find out more about Aidells and cooking with sausage, check out his Web site at www.aidells.com.

BY HOLLY RUDIN-BRASCHI