

TASTE

# Bye, Burch – hello, grill: Chef Isaac Becker shares the secrets to making steak

After the shuttering of a favorite restaurant, chef Isaac Becker shares his secrets to perfecting steak at home.

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I miss everything about Burch Steak, the restaurant that sparkled on the corner of Franklin and Hennepin avenues in the Lowry Hill neighborhood of Minneapolis.

Owners Isaac Becker and Nancy St. Pierre announced this past winter that the restaurant, which opened in 2013, will not return. The news came just as my hope of getting vaccinated spurred dreams of an actual chef-prepared meal in an actual restaurant. Burch had been my goal. It was the place I had most looked forward to revisiting when the coast was clear.

My list of Burch losses is long because I believe it got so much right. I adored the menu — not just the dishes it offered, but the physical thing itself, wrapped in cushioned leather and narrow enough that I could easily reach for my Manhattan as I considered what to order. Those Manhattans, tinged with cherry bark-vanilla bitters. The display of delicious desserts on a sideboard, warning customers to plan ahead. But the linchpin of my affection was perfectly prepared steak.

If I can't go there to celebrate my emergence from hibernation — or for any of the other reasons I used to go, from birthdays and Mother's Day to the simple need for a great steak — I have decided to do the next best thing: to create some semblance of my usual Burch meal at home.

I won't be sitting in the restaurant's main dining room, where giant windows let in city lights and ricocheted the crowd's joyous buzz. But I can make a close approximation of my favorite meal: bibb lettuce salad with ranch dressing, a side of carrots caramelized to sweetness and the beefy centerpiece. If I had room, I'd follow with the coconut cake, a beauty that reminded me that any meal at Burch was a special occasion.

I was willing to wing the sides and dessert, turning out carrots, ranch salad and coconut cake based on those already in my repertoire. But not the steak.



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Chef Isaac Becker teaches us how to make the perfect steak, keeping the memories of his Burch Steakhouse and Pizza Bar alive.

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I seemed to fail at steak more than I ever succeeded. I needed help. So I turned to the mastermind behind Burch Steak, chef Isaac Becker himself.

"It's not that hard to make steak," Becker assured me, before he laid out the basics. Each one is simple, but utterly essential.

Start with a nicely marbled piece of meat such as New York strip or rib-eye.

Be generous with the salt. Fat has flavor and salt brings it out, he explained. "Use more than you think you'll need. Some will fall off anyway."

Bring the steak to room temperature for a good half-hour.

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Preheat the grill or pan (Becker uses a cast iron skillet at home when he's not grilling). Make sure the cooking surface is hot enough to produce a satisfying sizzle as the steak hits it. When grilling, ward against fire flare-ups by keeping one part of the grill less hot, but be sure to get dark grill marks.

Use an instant-read thermometer. This tool is the only true way to understand when the steak is done to your liking (see recipe). Never cut into the meat to gauge its doneness; one small slice will sap steak of its delicious juices. Becker said that in the early days of Burch, one of the cooks was convinced that he knew a steak's degree of doneness by its feel. "We got a lot of steaks sent back until I insisted we use thermometers," Becker said. He likes the ThermoPop brand; they're a little expensive, he warned, but they read temperatures instantly. Why spend money on a pricey cut and then overheat it while waiting for a thermometer to register its internal temperature? (My ThermoPop, bought at Kitchen Window in Minneapolis a few years ago, is going strong. Current cost, \$36.)

Finally, take the meat off the heat and let it rest for five minutes. This allows it to settle and finish cooking.



KERRI WESTENBERG • STAR TRIBUNE

Steak, roasted carrots, bibb lettuce with ranch dressing and coconut cake for dessert mimics a favorite meal at the now-shuttered Burch Steak.

Turns out that I had been making lots of mistakes. My primary sin against New York strips? Checking doneness with a knife cut and keeping it on the grill until I considered it perfect. That meant that by the time I plated and ate it, perfection had long passed.

I followed Becker's advice and had a terrific meal.

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But I have a backup plan should I ever want to let someone else sweat the details: Hit a Becker restaurant.

Burch Steak may be closed, but his other Minneapolis spots — [Snack Bar](https://www.snackbarmpls.com/) (<https://www.snackbarmpls.com/>), [Bar La Grassa](http://www.barlagrassa.com/) (<http://www.barlagrassa.com/>) and [112 Eatery](http://www.112eatery.com/) (<http://www.112eatery.com/>) — will all offer steak now that they've returned to seated service. And all of them will probably be better than my own, despite Becker's cooking lesson.

## Roasted Carrots and Parsnips With Crispy Shallots

Serves 2 to 4.

Note: You'll have extra shallot oil and crispy shallots, and you'll be glad you do. Drizzle both or either on pizzas, pastas or salads. They upgrade everything. Crispy shallots and oil are adapted by Kerri Westenberg from Travis Lett's "Gjelina" cookbook.

For shallot oil:

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- 2 c. olive oil
- 5 shallots, thinly sliced

For carrots and parsnips:

- 5 carrots, peeled and halved lengthwise
- 2 parsnips, peeled and quartered lengthwise

- 2 tsp. fresh thyme, plus 2 sprigs
- Zest of one lemon
- Salt and pepper to taste

### **Directions**

Heat olive oil in a deep frying pan over medium-high heat. As it heats, add shallots and cook, stirring, until they turn a deep golden brown, 10 to 15 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer shallots to a paper towel-lined dish to drain.

Pour all but 2 tbsp. of the shallot oil into a heatproof jar. It can be stored up to 7 days.

Return frying pan with shallot oil to burner, turn heat down slightly (but not all the way to medium) and toss in carrots and parsnips, cut-side down. Add two sprigs of fresh thyme to pan. Cook until carrots and parsnips begin to caramelize, about 10 to 15 minutes.

While vegetables cook, stir together 2 tablespoons of crispy shallots, 2 teaspoons of fresh thyme and lemon zest.

Season caramelized vegetables with salt and pepper to taste, and scatter the shallot-lemon zest mixture on top just before serving.

## **Easy Homemade Buttermilk Ranch Dressing**

Serves 4 to 6.

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Note: This homemade salad dressing tastes so fresh, it is worth the small effort. It is adapted by Kerri Westenberg from Donald Link's "Real Cajun." To mimic the ranch salad from Burch, drizzle it over bibb lettuce. Burch's had grilled onions; I toss in cauliflower, cucumber and radishes.

- 1 bunch scallions
- 1/2 c. buttermilk
- 1/4 c. sour cream
- 1/4 c. mayonnaise

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- 2 tbsp. red wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp. lemon juice
- 1/2 tsp. dried thyme
- 1/2 tsp. dried basil
- 1/2 tsp. dried oregano

- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. pepper

### **Directions**

Chop scallions, including green parts. Purée the scallions in a food processor or blender. Add the remaining ingredients and pulse or blend until it is smooth.

## **Perfectly Prepared Steak**

Serves 2.

Note: These basic concepts shared by chef Isaac Becker can be used for any size steak. I went with a 14-ounce New York strip for two servings.

- Any size well-marbled steak such as New York strip or rib-eye
- Maldon or Kosher salt to taste, as much as 1 tsp. per side for 14 oz.

### **Directions**

Bring steak to room temperature, removing from refrigerator about 30 minutes before cooking. Heat a grill or fry pan, preferably cast iron, until it's hot enough for meat to sizzle on contact. Salt meat liberally. In a pan, turn after one side is crusty and dark brown. On grill, look for dark grill marks; beware of fire flare-ups and move steak to less heated spot if needed. Use an instant-read thermometer to measure the steak's internal temperature and take off heat when it reaches the following temperatures, according to your preference:

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Rare: 95-105 degrees

Medium-rare: 110-125 degrees

Medium: 130-140 degrees

Medium well: 145-155 degrees

The steak's temperature will continue to rise off the heat. Let it rest for 5 minutes before serving.

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## **Celebratory Coconut Cake**

Serves 10 to 12.

Note: Kerri Westenberg adapted this recipe from "Birthday Cakes," by Kathryn Kleinman. If you want some color and crunch, toast the coconut used to decorate the cake by placing it on a rimmed baking sheet in a 350-degree oven for 5 to 10 minutes. Stir occasionally and keep an eye out so it doesn't burn.

For cake:

- 3 1/2 c. cake flour
- 1 tbsp. baking powder

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- 3/4 tsp. salt
- 3/4 c. (11/2 sticks) butter at room temperature, plus more for greasing pans
- 13/4 c. sugar
- 4 large eggs, separated, at room temperature
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract

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- 1 tsp. coconut extract
- 1 (14-oz.) can coconut milk
- 1/4 tsp. cream of tartar

For frosting:

- 8 oz. cream cheese, chilled

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- 3/4 c. butter, at room temperature
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 3 c. powdered sugar
- 1 1/2 c. sweetened shredded coconut

## Directions

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To prepare the cake: Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line the bottoms of two 9-inch cake pans with parchment paper and lightly butter the sides and bottom.

Sift the flour, baking powder and salt into a large bowl.

In another large bowl, beat butter with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth. Gradually beat in sugar until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Beat in the egg yolks one at a time. Stir in the vanilla and coconut extracts.

With mixer on low speed, add the dry ingredients to the butter mixture alternately with the coconut milk, beginning and ending with the dry ingredients. Beat just until combined.

With clean beaters and bowl, beat the egg whites with the cream of tartar until medium-firm peaks form. Stir one-third of the whites into the batter to lighten; gently fold in the remaining whites.

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Divide the batter between the prepared pans and bake for about 30 minutes, or until toothpick inserted in middle of each layer comes out clean. Remove from oven and let cool on rack for 15 minutes. Remove from pans, remove parchment paper and let cool completely.

To prepare the frosting: Using an electric mixer, cream together cream cheese and butter until smooth. Beat in the vanilla. Gradually beat in the powdered sugar until well blended.

To frost, place one cake on plate, top down to make the bottom layer. Spread about 1/4 cup of frosting over the bottom layer. Center second cake on bottom layer, top up. Spread the remaining frosting over top and sides of the cake. Lightly press coconut over entire cake.

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