

How to Make Charred OCTOPUS

It's easy to cook this restaurant favorite at home.

TEXT BY JOANNE SMART; RECIPE BY JUSTIN SHOULTS



WHEN I EAT OUT, PART OF THE FUN COMES FROM ORDERING FOODS I DON'T NORMALLY COOK AT HOME. Charred octopus is one such item. While it has always been a menu staple at Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese restaurants, the cephalopod seems to be having a moment, appearing on widely varied menus around the country.

At Oak + Rowan in Boston, chef Justin Shoultz features octopus differently depending on the time of the year. In winter, that may mean pairing it with bone marrow and hazelnuts, while in summer, he makes it the star of his take on *salade Niçoise*, also featuring confit potatoes and an

incredible black olive caramel (see p. 94). “Octopus is great because it is from the sea but has a meaty texture,” says Shoultz. “This makes it versatile for all kinds of accompaniments in all seasons.”

No matter how he's serving it, Shoultz prepares his octopus the same way: a long, slow braise to make it tender, followed by a short sear on a very hot grill. This two-step method guarantees the octopus is tender with a hint of smokiness and some lovely crisp bits. Although the result is restaurant-worthy, his basic recipe is so easy to master that anyone can cook octopus at home—even me.

Good to Know

Octopus comes in a range of sizes. At his restaurant, chef Shoultz tends to prepare baby ones that are just a couple of inches long once cooked. (Octopus shrinks mightily when cooked.) Slightly larger and thicker tentacles—about 1 inch across at the thickest end before cooking—can be easier to grill and a better introduction for cooking.

Look for octopus in the frozen food aisle. Almost all octopus is frozen before shipping. Fortunately, the quality of octopus does not suffer much from freezing; plus, freezing begins the tenderizing process. If octopus has been blanched—it sometimes says so on the packaging—that's fine and won't affect the recipe here.

Look for cleaned octopus. Cleaning octopus is not for the squeamish as it involves removing the innards from the head sack, but most octopus is sold already cleaned. If you happen upon a fresh, uncleaned octopus, ask the fishmonger to clean it for you. If the octopus still has the head and beak attached, cut off the head (if the octopus

is large) and remove the beak, situated amid the legs, by popping it out the other side.

To tenderize octopus, cook it until ... tender. Cooking time will vary depending on size. You can test with a knife—the thickest part will yield to the blade—but Shoultz recommends taking a bite to be sure it's tender.

charred octopus

Tender, with a hint of the sea and ever-so-slightly smoky, charred octopus makes a great starter (see right for serving suggestions) and a great addition to pasta and risotto. The octopus needs to braise for 2 to 3 hours, but when it's time to serve, all it needs is a few minutes on the grill. Serves 4 to 6

- 3 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 3 ribs celery, coarsely chopped
- 2 large carrots, coarsely chopped
- 1 small Spanish onion, coarsely chopped
- 6 medium cloves garlic, smashed and peeled
- 1 large sprig fresh thyme
- 1 large dried bay leaf
- 3 cups white wine, preferably a full-bodied white, such as an unoaked Chardonnay
- 3 Tbs. white-wine vinegar
- Kosher salt
- 3½ to 4 lb. octopus, cleaned (thawed if frozen)
- 1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Heat the vegetable oil in a 6- to 8-quart Dutch oven or other heavy pot over medium heat. Add the celery, carrots, and onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until beginning to brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Add the garlic, thyme, and bay leaf, and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the wine and vinegar, and bring to a boil. Boil for 1 minute, then add 2 Tbs. salt and 4 cups water. Return to a boil, then lower to a simmer.

Add the octopus, cover, and cook at a low simmer until tender, 2 to 3 hours (cooking time will vary depending on size). The best way to test for tenderness is to take a bite; it should have almost no chew. If using tiny octopus, some of the heads may fall off, which is fine.

Allow the octopus to cool in the liquid for best flavor. (The octopus may be braised up to 2 days ahead; refrigerate it in the braising liquid.)

When ready to serve, remove the octopus from the braising liquid and pat dry. Prepare a medium-high (400°F to 475°F) gas or charcoal grill fire. If using a removable grill grid (good for thin tentacles), heat that as well.

Toss the octopus with the olive oil and ½ tsp. salt. Grill, flipping once, until the tips of the tentacles are slightly charred and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes total. Serve hot.



Pair With: DRY RIESLING
If serving with a yogurt sauce (top right), try Riesling; it complements the yogurt's tang while cutting through its creaminess.

HOW TO SERVE Charred Octopus

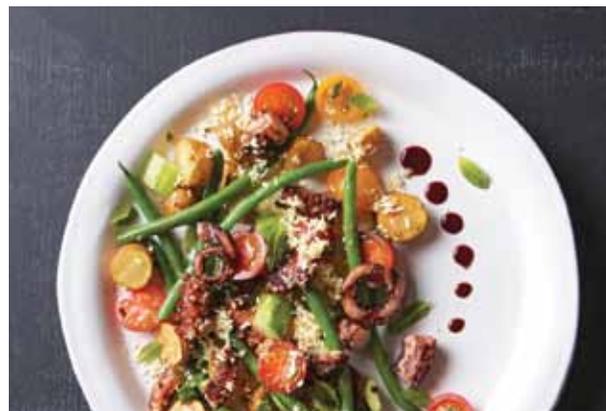
Serve it as a starter with a simple yogurt sauce. Shoultz mixes 3 Tbs. black garlic purée (see p. 98) with ¾ cup Greek yogurt, 1 tsp. each sherry vinegar and minced fresh parsley, and a little salt and pepper for a dramatically dark and deeply flavored accompaniment. Or, in place of black garlic, soak rehydrated chopped dates in dry sherry, and purée that with the yogurt to mimic the deep, sweet flavor of black garlic. In the photo at far left, we went easier still, mixing yogurt with chopped tender herbs and including some charred lemon slices and dressed microgreens on the plate.

Showcase it in a salad. Delicious in a simple green salad dressed with balsamic vinaigrette, it would also make an outstanding Caesar. Look for Shoultz's version of Niçoise salad featuring charred octopus (photo below) on *Fine Cooking's* website.

Toss it with pasta. Add some charred tentacles to your favorite tomato sauce—a spicy one would work especially well—and serve over pasta for a Sicilian-style treat. Or slice it thinly and top a pizza with it.

Pair it with potatoes. Serve it alongside roasted or grilled potatoes and roasted peppers drizzled with garlicky aioli.

Add it to a stew or paella. Since it's already cooked, include it at the last minute to boost excitement and flavor.



For this Niçoise Salad with Octopus recipe, go to [FineCooking.com/octopusnicoise](https://www.finecooking.com/octopusnicoise)