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## Bend it like Bittman

### Professional home cook challenges culinary luminaries and simplifies their dishes

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Most cooks would quiver at the thought of comparing their best dish to a meal cooked by one of the top chefs in town.

Besides natural talent and years of training, chefs have access to the best ingredients, world-class equipment and a legion of helpers to do tedious stuff like chopping, stirring and cleaning up. What home cook can compete with that?

Yet in this age of celebrity chefdom, when we're fed a steady diet of chef's books, chef's shows and chef's magazines, when it's de rigueur for a kitchen remodel to cost \$80,000, it seems like that's what people are supposed to be doing.

But Mark Bittman, a professional home cook, cookbook writer and author of a New York Times column that celebrates cooking in a minimalist style, suggests that maybe that's not the point. He thinks there's plenty to recommend a home-cooked meal.

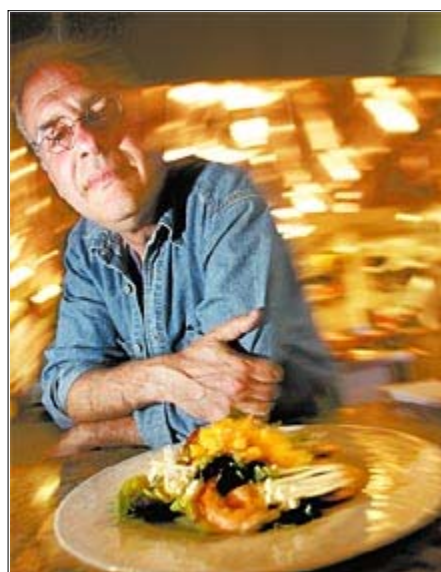
"I have a great deal of respect for chefs and what they do," he said. "(But) I would argue that home cooked is as good. You couldn't get the same TLC and love with a restaurant meal.

"A home-cooked meal is a gift. At a restaurant, it's not a gift; it's a bill," he joked.

In his latest book, "How to Cook Everything: Bittman Takes on America's Chefs" (Wiley Publishing Inc., \$24.95), Bittman goes into the kitchen with culinary luminaries including Suzanne Goin of Lucques in West Hollywood, Michel Richard of Citronelle in Washington, D.C., and James Boyce of Studio at the Montage Resort & Spa in Laguna Beach.

During each visit, the chefs cooked a few of their favorite dishes, and then Bittman made his own versions of the chef's creations, using similar flavors but simpler techniques and fewer ingredients. The challenges with the chefs and the resulting dishes are chronicled in a companion television series, which airs at 10:30 p.m. Thursdays on KPBS in San Diego.

On a West Coast tour to promote the new book and series, Bittman stopped in Laguna Beach to visit with Boyce. In a faux challenge re-creating a recipe from the book, Bittman prepared an Asian-inflected shrimp



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune

For his new TV series and book, Mark Bittman visited well-known chefs around the country and came up with simpler dishes inspired by their signature creations. His shrimp salad has some of the same flavors as a composed lobster salad made by James Boyce of Studio in Laguna Beach.

salad, while Boyce crafted a composed salad of lobster, corn and heirloom tomatoes seasoned with Minus 8, a pricey vinegar from Canada that is made from a fermented ice wine.

"I do like hanging around in kitchens, but these hotel kitchens are too hot," Bittman teased. Boyce paid back his guest by making him chop all his own vegetables with a Japanese knife that had a pink handle.

All Boyce's ingredients were neatly assembled, thanks to his staff. While the Studio chef carefully spooned corn and vegetables into a ring mold, Bittman tossed his watercress, basil and cilantro in a bowl and mixed with his hands.

Bittman's technique may not be as refined, but he believes the flavors in the shrimp salad were just as satisfying as those in the lobster salad. Often, Bittman's simplified dishes mirror the kind of uncomplicated food that chefs make for themselves at home.

"They don't want that fancy stuff every night," he said. "No one does."

### Mixed reaction

While some chefs didn't immediately take to the idea of a guy without professional restaurant chops coming into their kitchens and trying to out-cook them, others found the exercise interesting.

Chef Suvir Saran, who shares his recipes for tandoori shrimp and lamb-stuffed parathas in the book, said he appreciates Bittman's pragmatic approach to flavor and cooking.

"What I think Mark does, which 99 percent of chefs cannot do, is keep their ideas streamlined and clean," said Saran, chef of the Indian restaurant Devi in Manhattan.

"Chefs are like children in a candy store. If you give them 30 items to look at, even though instinct will tell them to play with two or three, their greed and curiosity get the better of them and they end up with 25."

There's nothing wrong with a 25-ingredient dish, Bittman said. It's just that most people don't have that kind of time every day. But just in case readers want to create the chef's dish, those recipes are included in the book.

As an easier alternative to Gary Danko's Grilled Quail With Bitter Greens Salad, Bittman created Sautéed Chicken with Green Olives and White Wine. The dishes share richly flavored poultry mingled with olives, wine and a shot of acidity. But the second dish doesn't require a day or two of marinating time.

When Kerry Simon of Simon Kitchen in Las Vegas makes his steak tartare, he starts with Niman Ranch filet mignon that he seasons in a classic style or with horseradish, cilantro and ginger.

Bittman finds that many people are uncomfortable with raw beef, so he created a burger with the classic tartare flavors of onion, capers and parsley.

Faced with Suzanne Goin's bread pudding made with homemade brioche bread and caramelized apples, Bittman came up with a version using store-bought brioche bread or challah, a Jewish egg bread that is more commonly available.

The recipes, written in Bittman's distinctive, matter-of-fact tone, list the preparation time for each dish. Yellow boxes delve into the finer points such as the importance of cooking bread pudding in a water bath or



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune  
Bittman (left) and Boyce clowned around in the Studio kitchen.

how to raise your dishes to another level with a *beurre noisette*, or browned butter sauce.

Silly and sometimes helpful snippets of conversation between Bittman and the chefs are repeated in the book as "shop talk." In one, Gary Danko explains that you know the pan is hot enough for cooking when the oil forms dimples and a sort of smile.

In another, Michel Richard snatches a spoon from Bittman after getting frustrated with his guest's un-French kitchen technique. A debate with Chris Schlesinger over gas grills vs. hardwood charcoal ends in a draw.

## Career change

So how does a guy who describes himself as the original Mr. Mom go from being a dad who likes to cook to being a culinary authority of page and screen?

Bittman, who is 55, said the journey began about 25 years ago, when he was living in Connecticut, a young married guy with one child. He had worked rather dispassionately as a cab driver, a substitute teacher and a truck driver.

In 1980, Bittman quit his job and started making his way through important cookbooks by people including Julia Child, Marcella Hazan, Elizabeth Andoh and Richard Olney, cooking for others whenever he could.

"I am not a methodical person, but about cooking, I was," he said. "I just loved it, and I wanted to master Things."

He doesn't know how to explain it, but running and cooking are the two passions he has pursued consistently through his adult life.

"It's like finding your love. You don't know who is going to appear," he said. "It (cooking) was something that absorbed me, and it was so satisfying when it was done."

That same year, he got a gig with the New Haven

Advocate writing restaurant reviews. He was in the middle of critiquing the pasta with pesto at a so-so restaurant, when he wrote, if you want to know how to make a good pesto sauce, see the recipe below. Eventually he started writing about cooking in earnest.

In 1990 he began writing for The New York Times; in 1997, he launched "The Minimalist," the column that cemented his style of sophisticated yet stress-free cooking.

Bittman said he came on the culinary scene at a time when people had been inundated with books on the complicated food of restaurant chefs – kind of like right now. Though he knows his way around the kitchen, he's more of an anti-chef.

"Celebrity chefdom and food television have done something of a disservice to home cooking because people believe they can't cook because they're not cooking like a chef," he said.

"How to Cook Everything," Bittman's all-purpose cookbook with a self-explanatory title, released in 1998, established him as an authority on home cooking and won the James Beard and Julia Child awards for general cookbooks. The thick yellow book, which has sold more than 1 million copies, has become such a kitchen staple that it's one of the books on the cooking-segment set of NBC's "Today Show."

His next book, "The Best Recipes in the World: More Than 1,000 International Dishes to Cook at Home" to be published by Doubleday/ Broadway Books this fall, tackles slightly more advanced dishes.

The title may seem hyperbolic or even boastful, but it's really Bittman's way of bucking up readers as they enter the kitchen.

"My job is to give people the confidence to break the first egg and then go another step beyond that," he said.

"It's like learning anything else. You have to be open and willing to make mistakes. It's like learning to ride a bicycle or drive a car."

But, Bittman added in a paraphrase of Julia Child, the great thing about cooking is that you can eat your mistakes.

## **Thai-Style Shrimp and Beef Salad**

4 servings

4 tablespoons olive oil

1 1/2 tablespoons sherry vinegar

2 teaspoons soy sauce, or to taste

1 shallot, peeled and minced

2 tablespoons corn or canola oil

1 (8-ounce) piece beef tenderloin

Salt

1 pound medium (31-35 count) shrimp, peeled and deveined if you like

1 bunch watercress, washed, thickest stems removed

1/2 cup peeled and diced papaya (optional)

2 ounces enoki mushrooms, rinsed (or thinly sliced white mushrooms)

Leaves from 4 to 5 fresh mint sprigs, washed and roughly chopped

Leaves from 2 or 3 stems fresh cilantro, washed and roughly chopped

Leaves from 2 to 3 stems fresh basil, washed and roughly chopped

Whisk together olive oil, vinegar, soy sauce and shallot. Taste and adjust the seasonings, adding more soy, vinegar or oil to taste.

Put oil in a 10-inch saute pan and turn heat to high. Season beef liberally with salt and, after 1 or 2 minutes, add beef to pan. Sear on each side for 3 to 4 minutes, until browned on outside and rare but not raw inside. Transfer the beef from the pan to a cutting board and let rest while you cook the shrimp.

Return same pan to stove, add shrimp and lower heat to medium. Cook until shrimp are browned on both sides, 4 to 5 minutes total.

Meanwhile, toss watercress with papaya, enoki and herbs in a large bowl. Pour vinaigrette over salad and toss

until greens are coated. When shrimp are ready, add them to the salad and toss again.

Slice meat as thinly as possible. Divide salad among four plates, top with sliced tenderloin and serve.

*(From "How to Cook Everything: Bittman Takes on America's Chefs" by Mark Bittman, Wiley Publishing Inc.)*

### **Sauteed Chicken With Green Olives and White Wine**

4 servings

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 (3-to 4-pound) chicken, cut up into serving pieces

Salt and black pepper

2 cups white wine

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

1 cup green olives, flesh lightly cracked with the side of a knife

1 lemon, thinly sliced, seeds removed

1/2 cup broken walnuts, toasted lightly

1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley or tarragon

Put oil in a deep skillet, preferably nonstick; turn heat to medium-high and wait a minute or so, until oil is hot. Add chicken, skin sides down, and brown it well, rotating pieces as necessary; the process will take 10 to 15 minutes. Sprinkle chicken with salt and pepper.

With skin sides up, add wine, balsamic vinegar and olives. Adjust heat so the mixture simmers vigorously and cook until chicken is almost done, 10 to 15 minutes.

Add sliced lemon and cook 2 to 3 minutes more. Arrange chicken and lemon on a platter and stir walnuts into sauce; taste and adjust seasoning. Spoon sauce over chicken, along with parsley. Serve hot.

*(From "How to Cook Everything: Bittman Takes on America's Chefs" by Mark Bittman, Wiley Publishing Inc.)*

### **James Boyce's Lobster Salad With Corn and Tomatoes**

4 servings

1 teaspoon white vinegar

1 teaspoon crushed black peppercorns

1 bay leaf

Salt and black pepper, to taste

4 (1 pound each) live lobsters

Large bowl ice water

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) butter (divided use)

1 shallot, peeled and thinly sliced

1 clove garlic, crushed

1 sprig fresh thyme

Kernels scraped from 2 large ears corn, preferably white

1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar, preferably white

4 assorted heirloom tomatoes, cored and quartered

1 to 2 tablespoons (or to taste) good red wine vinegar such as  
Minus 8 (see note)

1 tablespoon snipped fresh chives

Finely minced zest of 1 orange

Grapefruit-infused olive oil or extra virgin olive oil

In a large pot, combine the white vinegar, peppercorns, bay leaf and a handful of salt with 1 gallon water and bring to a boil. Poach lobsters for 4 minutes, just until shells start to turn bright red, then plunge into ice water. When lobsters are cool, break them apart and extract meat. Split the claw meat into 2 pieces and cut the tail meat into 1/4-inch slices. Reserve.

Put 2 tablespoons butter in a small saute pan over medium heat. When butter melts, add the shallot, garlic and thyme. Cook for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally, until shallot is softened but not colored. Add the corn and balsamic vinegar and cook for 5 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the corn is browned and no longer tastes starchy. Cool briefly, taste and season with salt and black pepper.

Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a small saute pan (you could transfer the corn to a bowl and reuse the pan) and warm the poached lobster – you don't want to let the lobster cook much more – until it is glazed with the melted butter. Meanwhile, toss the tomatoes with the red wine vinegar and chives and season with salt and black pepper to taste.

Portion tomatoes among four plates (cut sides down so they lay flat), mound a few spoonfuls of corn on top, then top each of the corn and tomato piles with lobster, laying sliced tail pieces on top. Season each salad with a spoonful of the butter the lobster was warmed in, a drop of red wine vinegar and a pinch of orange zest. Drizzle a ring of oil around each salad and serve.


Note: Minus 8 is a Canadian vinegar fermented from ice wine. It costs \$29 for a 100-ml bottle and is available at [www.minus8vinegar.com](http://www.minus8vinegar.com) or (877) 209-7634.

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