

those who like a glazed top, there is another disadvantage: The enclosed pan allows the meat juices to bubble up from the sides to dilute and destroy the glaze. Similarly, bacon placed on top of the meat loaf curls and doesn't properly attach to the loaf, and if tucked inside the pan, the bacon never crisps.

For all these reasons, we advise against the use of a standard loaf pan. If you prefer a crustless, soft-sided meat loaf, you should invest in a meat loaf pan with a perforated bottom and accompanying drip pan. The enclosed pan keeps the meat soft while the perforated bottom allows the drippings to flow to the pan below. While still not ideal for a crispy bacon top, it at least saves a glaze from destruction.

We ultimately found that baking a meat loaf free-form in a shallow baking pan gave us the results we wanted. The top and sides of the loaf brown nicely, and, as an additional advantage, basting sauces, like the brown sugar and ketchup sauce we developed, glaze the entire loaf, not just the top. Bacon, too, covers the whole loaf. And because its drippings also fall into the pan, the bacon crisps up nicely.

Meat Loaf with Brown Sugar-Ketchup Glaze

SERVES 6 TO 8

If you like, you can omit the bacon topping from the loaf. In this case, brush on half of the glaze before baking and the other half during the last 15 minutes of baking. If you choose not to special-order the mix of meat below, we recommend the standard meat loaf mix of equal parts beef, pork, and veal, available at most grocery stores.

BROWN SUGAR-KETCHUP GLAZE

- 1/2 cup ketchup or chili sauce
- 4 tablespoons brown sugar
- 4 teaspoons cider or white vinegar

MEAT LOAF

- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped

- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme leaves
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon hot red pepper sauce
- 1/2 cup whole milk or plain yogurt
- 2 pounds meat loaf mix (50 percent ground chuck, 25 percent ground pork, 25 percent ground veal)
- 3/4 cup crushed saltine crackers (about 16) or quick oatmeal or 1 1/3 cups fresh bread crumbs
- 1/3 cup minced fresh parsley leaves
- 6-8 ounces thin-sliced bacon (8 to 12 slices, depending on loaf shape)

1. For the glaze: Mix all ingredients in small saucepan; set aside.

2. For the meat loaf: Heat oven to 350 degrees. Heat oil in medium skillet. Add onion and garlic; sauté until softened, about 5 minutes. Set aside to cool while preparing remaining ingredients.

3. Mix eggs with thyme, salt, pepper, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, pepper sauce, and milk or yogurt. Add egg mixture to meat in large bowl along with crackers, parsley, and cooked onion and garlic; mix with fork until evenly blended and meat mixture does not stick to bowl. (If mixture sticks, add additional milk or yogurt, a couple tablespoons at a time, until mix no longer sticks.)

4. Turn meat mixture onto work surface. With wet hands, pat mixture into approximately 9 x 5-inch loaf shape. Place on foil-lined (for easy cleanup) shallow baking pan. Brush with half the glaze, then arrange bacon slices, crosswise, over loaf, overlapping slightly and tucking only bacon tip ends under loaf.

5. Bake loaf until bacon is crisp and internal temperature of loaf registers 160 degrees, about 1 hour. Cool at least 20 minutes. Simmer remaining glaze over medium heat until thickened slightly. Slice meat loaf and serve with extra glaze passed separately.