

# PESTO LAMB

(*Agnello alla Genovese*)

By Dennis W. Viau; an original recipe.

I believe a lot of cooks shy away from lamb because the meat tastes a little gamey and they don't know how to deal with the flavor. The trick is to work *with* the lamb's flavor by adding complementary flavors such as garlic or rosemary. Lamb is a delicious red meat and I much prefer its flavor to beef. I rarely buy beef, but I almost always have lamb in the freezer. The flavor stands up well with other bold flavors.



This is one of my signature recipes, which is requested often among my friends. This recipe was entered into a nationwide contest and won a place in the *Cook's Country Best Lost Suppers* cookbook by America's Text Kitchen. Look for me on page 132. They changed the recipe considerably. Following is the original:

## Ingredients:

4 cups fresh basil leaves, packed (about 4 ounces/113g)  
5 to 8 cloves of garlic, depending on size; peeled  
1 cup (140g) pine nuts; lightly toasted<sup>1</sup> (see notes at end)  
1 cup (115g) grated Parmesan or Romano cheese  
½ cup (120ml) extra virgin olive oil  
1 leg of lamb, boneless; about 5 lbs (2.25kg)<sup>2</sup>  
Fresh ground pepper to taste

## Directions:

Put the pine nuts in a skillet over medium heat and toast them until they start to turn light brown, about 5 minutes. Remove them from the skillet to cool. Remove the basil leaves from their stems (discard the stems) and place in a sturdy plastic ziplock bag with the cooled pine nuts and the garlic cloves. Moderately hammer the contents with a rubber mallet or the smooth side of a meat tenderizing mallet until well crushed. (This takes a while.)

Place the crushed basil, garlic, pine nuts, cheese and oil in a food processor and blend well. The pesto should be more dry than oily, more like a soft paste. (This makes about 1½ cups of pesto.)

Remove the string or elastic wrapping from the lamb, if present, and trim off the fatty rind and any large pieces of fat. Open the leg and spread one third to one half the pesto on the inside meat. Roll the leg and tie with kitchen twine. Sprinkle pepper all over the leg and then spread the remaining pesto on the outside. Wrap in plastic wrap and let sit in the refrigerator for 24 hours.

Heat the oven to 350°F (175°C). Remove the leg from the plastic and place in a roasting pan. Don't remove the pesto. Roast until the internal temperature reaches 125°F (52°C) for medium-rare (about 1½ hours) or 155°F (70°C) for medium (about 2 hours). Check with a meat thermometer<sup>3</sup>. Remove the roast from the oven and let rest for 15 minutes to redistribute the juices before carving.

The **Step By Step** guide begins on the following page.

## STEP-BY-STEP

1



I buy the boneless lamb leg at the warehouse store for (currently) \$4.99 per pound. You can buy lamb with the bone in and remove it yourself. I've done it. It's not too difficult. The pesto is made with standard ingredients: Basil, pine nuts, garlic, Parmesan cheese (I am using Romano cheese here because I prefer the flavor), and olive oil.

2



The lamb comes with an elastic net sort of thing that holds it together, much like tying a roast.

**3**

I remove the elastic because I want to trim off the fatty rind. Normally you would roast the leg with the rind upward. The heat would render the fat and the melted fat would baste the meat, leaving a crisp skin on top. However, I want to marinate the meat, not the fat, and therefore the fat must be trimmed away. This takes time because the rind covers nearly the entire leg. Along the way I also trim out large pieces of fat within the meat. Don't trim away all the fat, as it helps the meat to be more tender.

**4**

Here is the trimmed leg. As you can see, there are still small areas of fat in the meat.

5



Place the pine nuts in a skillet over medium-high heat and toast them until they start to change color, about 5 minutes. This will give them a nuttier flavor. Remove from the pan and set aside to cool.

6



Here is where a lot of cooks go wrong with pesto. They put the ingredients in a food processor and chop them. The flavor is never as good because for proper pesto you need to get the flavorful juice out of the leaves. One way to do this is to grind the leaves with a mortar and pestle. I used to do this, until my carpal tunnel syndrome flared up as a result. Now I place the leaves (after removing and discarding the larger stems), along with the garlic cloves (peeled) and the pine nuts, in a sturdy plastic bag. Then I use a rubber mallet to crush the contents. Work slowly, as you don't want to split the bag and squirt basil all over your kitchen. If you don't have a rubber mallet, you can use the smooth side of a tenderizing hammer. Even a wooden rolling pin would work. Beat the leaves until they are well bruised and the juices are evident. As you work, let air out of the bag.

7



Now run the crushed ingredients through a food processor with the cheese and oil to blend everything.

8



Here is our pesto, fresh from the food processor. As you can see, I don't use a lot of oil. I like this pesto to get to stick to the meat. Some oil is necessary because the basil flavor is oil based.

9



Open the roast to expose the inside meat (this is called *butterflying* the meat) and spread liberally with about a third of the pesto. It doesn't need to be spread evenly. You can use your fingers. Just make sure it gets well distributed.

10



Roll up the meat, enclosing the pesto, and tie with ordinary kitchen twine. I usually don't tie it twice from end to end, as you see above, but I was having difficulties getting the end flaps to stay in place.

You don't need to get too fancy when you tie up a roast. The purpose is to gather and hold all the meat together into a rounded shape that it will roast evenly. You don't want some parts of the roast to be overcooked and tough while other areas remain undercooked. Tying a roast helps assure a more uniform doneness according to the degree of cooking you prefer—medium rare, medium, etc. (See chart at end).

11



Sprinkle the meat with pepper and then use the remaining pesto to coat the outsides of the leg. As this will be wrapped in plastic next, I lay out a large sheet of plastic wrap and place the leg in the center before I coat the outside. Any pesto that falls off the sides will be gathered up to the leg when the wrapping is brought together. (It also helps keep the kitchen counter clean.)

12



Finally the leg is completely wrapped in plastic. This is then placed in the refrigerator to marinate overnight. For added precaution, lest the juices should leak from the plastic wrap and drip into my refrigerator, I seal the lamb in a ziplock bag or place it in a large bowl.

**13**

The following day the leg is ready to roast. Place it in a roasting pan and bake in a 350°F (175°C) oven until the internal temperature reaches 135°F (60°C) for medium-rare or 155°F (70°C) for medium. Although 125°F (52°C) is not recommended for lamb, I've done it. In my oven a 4½-pound leg takes 90 to 100 minutes to reach 125°F if it starts cold from the refrigerator (around 40°F (4°C)).

**14**

About 1½ hours later the lamb is ready to come out of the oven. For this roast I removed it when the internal temperature reached 135°F (60°C). Allow to rest for 15 to 20 minutes to let the juices redistribute in the meat. The internal temperature will rise about 10 degrees during this time even though the roast is out of the oven because the heat will distribute also.



15



Remove the strings. You might need to leave one string toward the middle to hold the roast together; otherwise it could fall open a little, which would allow the meat to cool too rapidly. Carve and serve. There won't be any juices in the bottom of the pan with which to make gravy. In the roasting pan you'll only see some pesto that fell off the meat while it was cooking (see the picture in Step 14 above).

## Conclusion:

This really is a delicious cut of meat. I find it does not need any accompaniment, such as gravy or mint jelly, because the pesto adds just the right flavor to go with this meat. As America's Test Kitchen put it when they reviewed my recipe, "Garlicky pesto is perfect paired with bold lamb." I agree.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> You can experiment with different ingredients in pesto. I've substituted roasted almonds for the pine nuts (when they were expensive and difficult to find) and I've added about 20 oil-cured Italian olives (pits removed). The results were delicious. I also like roasted pecans in my pesto.

<sup>2</sup> I buy the boneless leg of lamb in the local warehouse store. If you have a local butcher you can ask him/her to remove the bone for you. (Save the bone, wrap it in foil, and bake it in the same oven with the lamb. If you go to dinner at a home where their annoying little dog obnoxiously begs at the table give the godforsaken mutt the bone to gnaw in the backyard.) The leg isn't too difficult to debone yourself. I've done it many times. Use a good sharp boning knife. Cut down through the meat until you reach the bone, then cut around the bone until it is separated from the meat. It's a lot easier than boning a chicken!

<sup>3</sup> I find it is much more accurate to work with a meat thermometer rather than cook the meat *so many minutes* per pound. The starting temperature is the problem. When I roast meat right after prepping it, the internal temperature might be up around 70°F (21°C). This meat will then require less time to come up to the desired finished temperature in the oven. When I remove a prepared roast from the refrigerator, such as this leg of lamb, the internal temperature will be down around 40°F (4°C), which would require a longer roasting time to be cooked properly. I therefore use a thermometer with a probe that I insert into the meat before it goes into the oven. The electronic monitor, connected by a cable, sits outside the oven. I set the monitor to emit a beeping signal when the internal temperature reaches the desired setting.

The leg of lamb I prepared for this PDF was 4.73 pounds before it was trimmed. The internal temperature before it went into the oven was 43°F (12°C). It took 100 minutes in the oven to reach 125°F (52°C). That's 21 minutes per pound. According to my Lamb Doneness Chart (see below), that figure is too high. Using a probe thermometer to check the oven's temperature accuracy, the readout was 353°F when my oven indicated it had reached 350°F. I can therefore assume my oven does not need to be calibrated and that the difference in cooking time is due to the cold starting temperature. This is why I always recommend roasting with a digital thermometer with a probe you can leave inserted in the meat while it is in the oven. You will know the internal temperature and can therefore cook your roast to the desired doneness without any guessing.

This is my Lamb Doneness Chart that I keep in my cooking binder (see addendum below):

#### LAMB DONEYNESS CHART

Degree of Doneness	Traditional Guidelines	Updated Guidelines
Rare (red inside)	Cook to 130°F (54°C) or 10-12 minutes per pound (22-26 minutes per kilogram).	Not recommended.
Medium-Rare (pink inside)	Cook to 135°F (57°C) or 12-15 minutes per pound (26-33 minutes per kilogram).	Cook to 140°F (60°C) or 15-18 minutes per pound (33-40 minutes per kilogram). The temperature after the resting period should reach 145°F (63°C).
Medium (barely pink inside)	Cook to 140° (60°C) or 15-18 minutes per pound (33-40 minutes per kilogram).	Cook to 155°F (68°C) or 20-25 minutes per pound (44-55 minutes per kilogram). The temperature after the resting period should reach 160°F (71°C).
Well-Done (gray-brown throughout)	Cook to 165°F (74°C) or 25-30 minutes per pound (55-66 minutes per kilogram).	Cook to 165°F (74°C) or 25-30 minutes per pound (55-66 minutes per kilogram). The temperature after the resting period should reach 170°F (77°C).

ADDENDUM: In 2011 the USDA revised their recommended minimum safe cooking temperatures for all cuts of meat to 145°F (63°C). The recommended temperature for ground meats remains at 160°F (71°C). This is where quality needs to be balanced with safety. I prefer a slightly pinker cut of meat; so I roast it to a lower temperature. The risk, if present, is low.