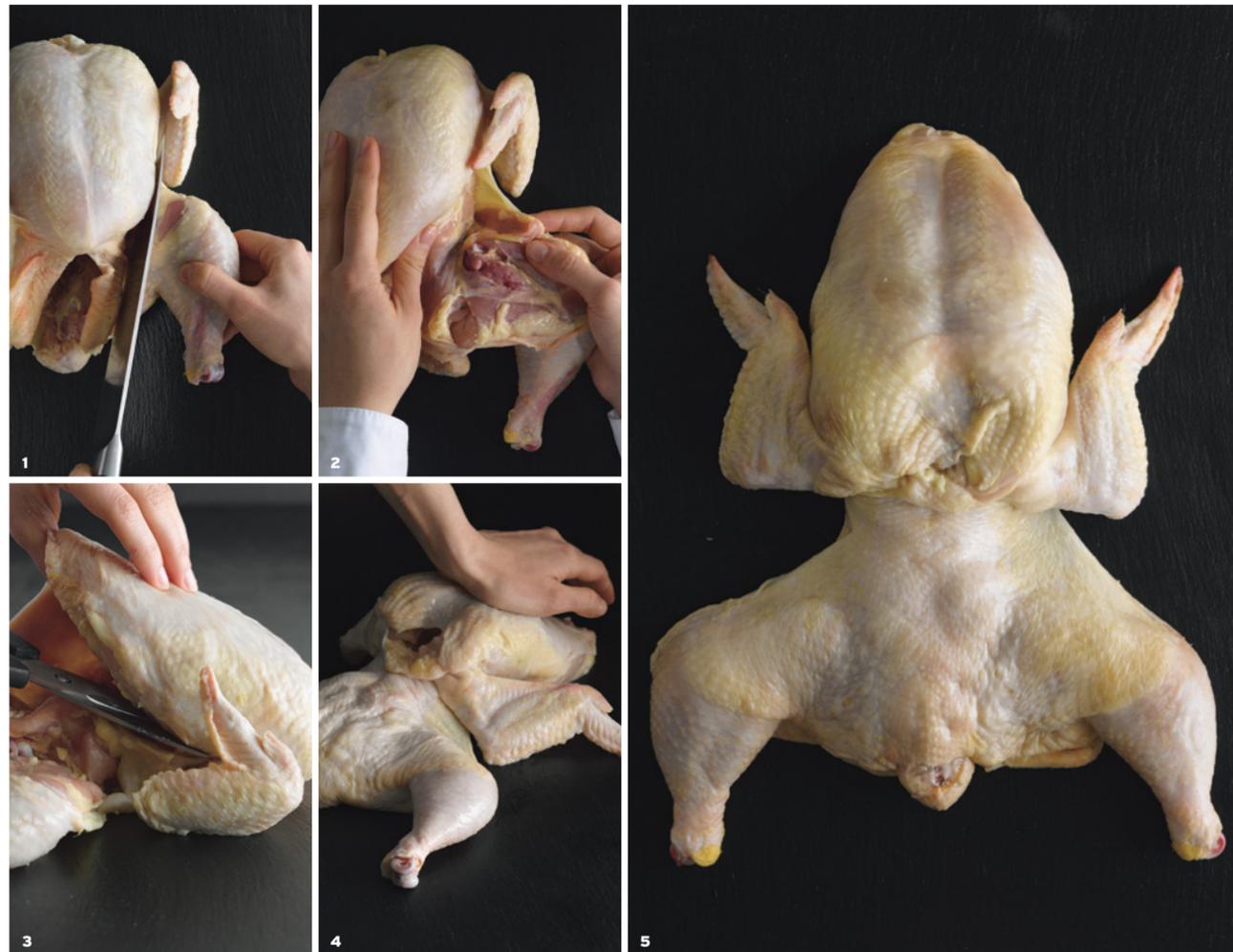


KITCHEN NOTEBOOK

You can handle it: Get the most out of grilled chicken, short ribs, and filets mignons by opening them up ... all about dried avocado leaves ... cactus two ways. BY JANE DANIELS LEAR



'LEAPING FROG' CHICKEN: A LITTLE FLATTENING GOES A LONG WAY

"There are lots of barbecued chickens in the world," declared test kitchen director Ruth Cousineau. "But this has to be one of the best. It stays incredibly juicy and cooks evenly, whether on the grill or in the oven." When she caught me looking dubiously at the large, flattened bird—at least, I think it was a bird—that she had just pulled off the grill, she grinned and said, "But I suppose you want to know how it got this way." Cousineau had learned the so-called "leaping frog" technique (page 78) from Latin-cooking authority Maricel Presilla, and she couldn't wait to reveal how easy it is. (1) With the drumsticks of the chicken facing you, cut between the body and one drumstick, leaving the drumstick attached. (2) Widen the area around the thigh joint and bend the leg back until it pops out of joint but still remains attached. It's not difficult to do; it's actually a matter of feel. You'll see, the next drumstick will go much faster. (3) Exchange your knife for kitchen or poultry shears. Lifting up the breast, cut through the ribs all the way to the shoulder joint, first on one

side, then on the other. Now the bird is essentially in two pieces that are hinged at the shoulders. Turning over the chicken so that it is skin side up, open it so that it's splayed out on the work surface. (4) With the heel of one hand, press down hard on the breastbone to crack and flatten it. (5) Stand back and admire your work. From this topographical perspective, the chicken is huge; you can see all the meat you're getting. A great advantage to this technique, I realized, is that it utilizes the whole bird. In contrast, a flattening method like spatchcocking involves cutting out the back—handy for the soup pot, obviously, but a real disappointment for anyone at the table who is fond of extracting all those sweet, tender morsels of meat from that neglected bony chicken part. Cousineau picked up a lemon slice and used it to slather the bird with marinade—fragrant with cumin, oregano, allspice, and garlic—working it between the flesh and the loose skin, the way Presilla does. "Every so often, a recipe comes along and changes your life," she said. "And this one will."



DRIED AVOCADO LEAVES

There is such a premium placed on ultra-freshness these days that it's easy to forget what dried aromatic leaves can do for food. Take, for instance, avocado leaves: Mexican cooks use them to give a warm, almost creamy (in a vanilla kind of way) anise-basil-nut fragrance to everything from stews and tamales to the refried black beans on page 73. Related to bay leaves, they are similar in that they're an ingredient you would miss if it weren't there. Unlike bay leaves, however, which are discarded before serving, avocado leaves are often toasted and sometimes ground before being incorporated into a dish. Leaves from Mexican avocados (*Persea drymifolia*) are generally more intense than leaves from American hybrids; available at Latin markets and gourmetsleuth.com, they frequently come crumbled, as shown above.



PRICKLY PEARS

These fruits (*tunas* in Spanish) are the large berries that cap the cactus paddles (shown at right) of the genus *Opuntia* in particular. Indigenous to Mexico, they're grown commercially on semiarid land from Sicily to the Middle East; a native-born Israeli, in fact, is known as a sabra, from the Modern Hebrew word for the fruit. The seedy flesh comes in a welter of colors, from pale green to the crimson shown above. Prickly pears are as juicy as they look, and in flavor they're a blend of watermelon, strawberry, and something a little tangy—kiwifruit, perhaps—thrown in for good measure. They give a pretty pink hue to drinks such as the Oaxacan shake on page 72, and they are also delicious eaten out of hand (and over the sink). Look for prickly pears, which come from Mexico and California, at Latin markets and many supermarkets.



CACTUS PADDLES

You might think of cactus paddles (nopales or nopalitos) as survival rations for Death Valley desperadoes, but they're an important staple in many parts of the world, just like prickly pears (same cactus, but cultivated for the fruit rather than the fleshy stems). One bite will tell you why. "To me, they taste like the best green beans ever," says Maricel Presilla. Yes, but there is an intriguing, almost sorrel-like tartness to them as well. Although many of the cultivars available at Latin markets and many supermarkets are thornless, take care to shave off any stray stickers with a knife. In Latin America, the paddles are commonly boiled, which releases their mucilage, but Presilla grills them (page 72) the way street vendors do in Mexico. The end result is still a bit like okra, but amazingly succulent, too—something we could survive on any day.



CUTTING TO THE CHASE

BEEF SHORT RIBS

In the United States, rich, fatty short ribs (sometimes labeled "flanken") are a braising cut—the slow, moist cooking makes the meat unctuous. In Argentina and Uruguay, though, the ribs, which come in long 10- to 12-inch sections (*tira de asado*), are meant to be grilled. They're a star component, in fact, of Maricel Presilla's pan-Latin cookout (page 64). Quick cooking over live fire to the medium doneness that is traditional brings out the steakiness of the ribs: They're not fork-tender, but instead they develop a wonderful chew and a supremely beefy flavor. Most short ribs available at U.S. markets are sold in roughly three-rib portions; choose those that are from 1½ to 2½ inches thick.

FILETS MIGNONS

The fact that filets mignons (page 34) are not common fodder for the grill didn't faze food editor and stylist Paul Grimes one iota. He simply decided to reconfigure each small, thick, roundish hunk of meat into a long, thin, flat rectangle—something much more practical for a grill surface. Putting one piece of center-cut filet mignon on its side and holding his knife perpendicular to the work surface, he sliced into the meat crosswise a half inch from the bottom but stopped just short of cutting all the way through the meat. After rotating the piece of filet a half turn, he continued to cut in the same manner (left) and gradually unfurled the strip of beef as he went along. ▮

ROMULO YANES FOOD STYLING; ANDREA ALBIN