

TECHNIQUE CLASS

Perfecting poached eggs

Poached eggs are a favorite around my house. Because there's no added fat in the cooking of them—the eggs out of their shell are cooked in simmering water—poached eggs show off all of the incredible flavor eggs have to offer.

I've always been puzzled by the disproportionate number of kitchen gizmos marketed around this relatively simple cooking method. With fresh eggs, a few basic pieces of equipment—a pot, a slotted spoon, a dish to crack the eggs into—and some helpful hints, achieving a luxurious poached egg is actually a relatively simple accomplishment.

Start with the freshest eggs

My idea of a perfectly poached egg is when the set white envelops the runny yolk, forming a teardrop shape. To get those results, you need to start with the freshest eggs you can get your hands on. As eggs age, a lot of things are happening inside that porous shell. Moisture and air are moving from inside the shell to the

outside environment, and vice versa. During this time, the egg white, also called the albumen, thins. You don't want a thin albumen for poached eggs because it won't hold its shape as well as a thick one. A thicker white will also cling to the yolk better. Another benefit of fresh eggs: they have a stronger yolk that's less likely to break.

To check an egg's freshness, put it (in its shell) in a large bowl of room-temperature water. As an egg ages, it loses moisture, and the air sac inside the large end of the egg shell enlarges. The swelling of the air sac increases the egg's buoyancy. Therefore, the older the egg, the higher it floats. If an egg shows more than the size of a dime above the water, it's not suitable for poaching; you might want to scramble it instead and wait to poach with fresher eggs. To keep eggs fresh, store them in the container they came in them and keep them cold.

Poach the eggs straight from the fridge. Adding cold eggs to hot water is a

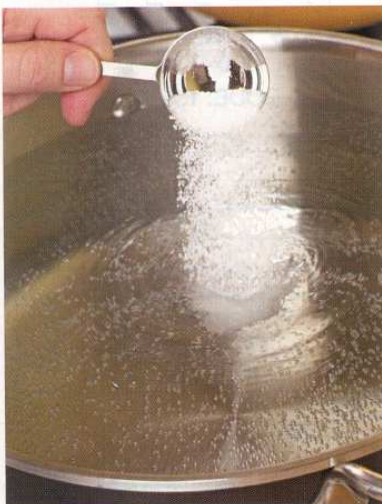
good move for a couple of reasons. Eggs are noticeably more viscous when cold and so will hold their shape better when added to the hot water. Also, starting with a cold egg will promote slow cooking so that the yolk will still be runny when the white is completely set.

Although you can crack the egg right into the pot of water, you'll get more consistent results by cracking the egg into a small dish or ramekin first and then pouring the egg into the pot as close to the water as possible (see the photo below).

Cook the eggs in water four inches deep. The depth of the water is an important factor for achieving the teardrop-shaped poached egg. In four inches of water, the yolk drops to the bottom of the pan with the egg white trailing above it. If the water is too shallow, the egg will look like it's been cooked over easy. Too deep, and too much of the egg white will be drawn to the top of the water.

The secret ingredient: vinegar. Adding vinegar to the water will assist in the

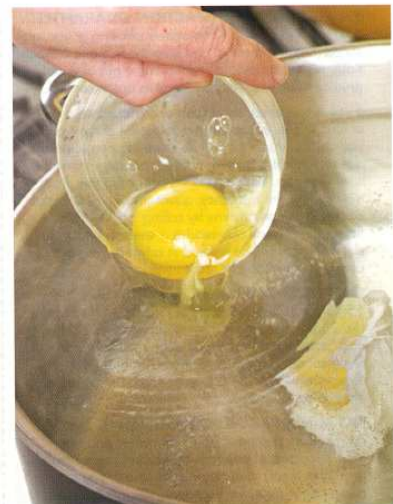
Gently pour cold, cracked eggs into salted, simmering water



Start with four inches of water and add vinegar and salt. Use 2 tablespoons vinegar and ½ tablespoon salt per quart of water.



Crack cold eggs into little dishes for risk-free results. This way you'll know your yolks were whole going in.



Bring the dish as close to the water as possible and gently pour all at once. Pouring from great heights will deform the egg's shape.

Photos: Scott Phillips



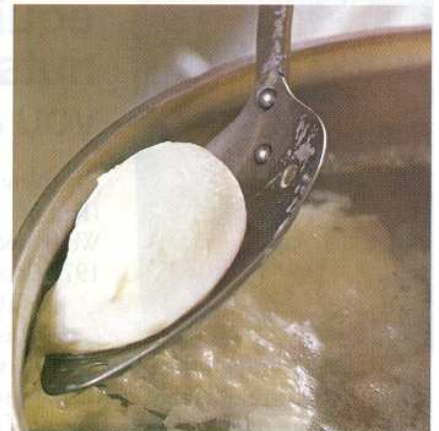
Cook until the whites set and then trim the tendrils



Watch the egg whites rise to the top. If a yolk bursts, leave it be; it should heal itself.



Test for doneness at 4 minutes. Gently press where the yolk and white meet; the yolk should be soft and the white set.



Trim the whites by pressing the edge of the slotted spoon against the inside of the pan.

coagulation of the egg white. Two tablespoons of vinegar to every quart of water is beneficial without any residual taste of vinegar in the egg. I also add half a tablespoon of coarse salt per quart of water, which seasons the egg lightly while also promoting coagulation.

Bring the water to just under a boil. At this beginning temperature (about 205°F), there will be small bubbles in the bottom of the pan (as well as some on the surface) that will help prevent the eggs from sticking to the bottom of the pan. The water's natural current from the bottom of the pan toward the top promotes the even coating of the yolks with the egg whites. Although this temperature is higher than normal for most poaching (fish and chicken are poached in liquids between 140°F and 185°F), eggs cook best at a higher temperature for a shorter time (four to five minutes). The higher temperature helps the egg white to set quickly and retain its shape without overcooking the yolk.

Never boil the water. This will overcoagulate the proteins and create rubbery egg whites.

Trim and dry the cooked egg. To get rid of the tail of the poached egg, trim it either by the method shown in the top right photo or by using a knife. Although trimming is mainly for cosmetic pur-

poses, drying the eggs is for flavor; water dripping from the egg will make your base soggy and will literally water down the flavor of the egg.

How many eggs you poach is a matter of how well you can keep up with them. Four eggs poaching in a four-quart pan at one time is reasonable even for those new to poaching. If you want to cook more in a larger pot, the trick will be keeping track of the eggs as they finish cooking. By the time you get the tenth egg in there, the first may be overcooked.

But you can cook poached eggs ahead of serving them. Restaurants do this all the time. If you're cooking for a crowd, poach eggs in batches ahead of time; you'll get more evenly cooked eggs than if you try to poach a dozen at once. Poach the eggs until they're just slightly underdone and then immediately transfer them to a bowl of ice and water to stop the cooking. They can actually remain in the cold water, refrigerated, overnight. Just before serving them, reheat them in salted simmering water for about a minute.

Beyond eggs Benedict. There are many ways to serve poached eggs, and they needn't be reserved only for brunch. What comes to mind first is eggs Benedict, consisting of a toasted English muffin half topped with a slice of ham or

Dry the eggs or you'll be soggy



Gently blot the egg dry with a folded paper towel or linen dishtowel.

Canadian bacon, a poached egg, and a dollop of Hollandaise sauce. But a delicious variation of that classic is to serve the eggs with some cured salmon and sautéed spinach along with the buttery sauce. Poached eggs are also a traditional topping for pizza, pasta, and firm polenta.

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