

How to Make Homemade Sausage

Posted by Hank Shaw of Hunter Angler Gardener Cook on April 3, 2009



Making sausage at home is one of those lost arts that really is not so difficult as it sounds. At its core, a sausage is simply ground meat and fat, salt, and flavorings. It really is not much more involved than grinding your own hamburger; you don't even have to stuff it into links if you don't want to. Yet the flavor of a well-made link surpasses the sum of its parts, and a truly great sausage is fit to be served as a main course at a fancy dinner.

Good sausage is all about balance. Balance of salt and savory, balance of meat and fat, balance of spices and herbs within the whole. Knowing a proper ratio of salt to meat (and fat) is essential, but once you understand it you can adjust to your own perception of saltiness, which varies wildly among people. Some sort of liquid helps tighten the bind when you mix the sausage meat; and without this bind you have hamburger, not sausage. You also need a proper amount of fat, at least 20 percent – I have not yet met a low-fat sausage worth eating.

But beyond those “rules,” your ingredient list is limited only by your imagination. You can toss in as many or as few herbs and spices and other

flavorings as you'd like. What liquid to use? Anything from water to fruit juice to wine to cream. What sort of meat? Usually pork, but beef and lamb are also good, as are game animals. Do you want a fine grind or a coarse one? How much fat? I like 25-30 percent, but you could go as high as 50 percent.

A good start is a typical Italian sweet sausage, and this is what I'll walk you through here. Sweet sausage is only slightly sweet – it's really called so to differentiate it from the Italian hot sausage, which has paprika, chiles and oregano.

Before You Start: Special Equipment Needed

Before you begin you do need some specialized equipment; this is what keeps many home cooks from bothering with sausage.

First, you need a proper meat grinder. I suggest the attachment for the KitchenAid stand mixer as a good start. Stand-alone meat grinders are good, too, and you could even use one of the old hand-cranked grinders. You need at least two dies – coarse and fine – that dictate how wide the strands of ground meat will be when they emerge from the grinder. You will also need a good scale, as most sausage recipes use weight, not volume to properly measure ingredients; a little too much or too little salt in a sausage and you can ruin it. Precision matters.

Are you going to stuff your sausages into casings? Then you need a sausage stuffer. Quality stuffers can run several hundred dollars, but if you plan to make sausage with any frequency, I highly recommend spending the cash. Do not stuff your sausages using the grinder attachment, as it will get the mixture too hot and can ruin the texture. Either do this right or leave your sausages loose.

If you do stuff your sausages, you need casings. Most decent butchers make their own sausages and will sell you hog casings, which are the scrubbed, salted intestines of a pig. (Don't feed these sausages to those who cannot eat pork! I once knew a guy who made a lamb sausage so his Jewish friends could eat it, but forgot and stuffed them in hog casings. That did not go over too well.) Some people like the synthetic collagen casings you can buy on the internet. I do not. Why bother with this? The stuffing process compresses the meat and fat mixture and integrates the flavors better than in loose sausage – it is why most professionals prefer sausages in links.

Another option is to ask your butcher for caul fat, which surrounds the innards of pigs. It looks like a spider's web and, once moistened in warm water, can be cut and used as a wrapper for your sausage to make crepinettes. Wonderful stuff. Other alternatives are using blanched savoy cabbage leaves or something similar as casings.

A piece of equipment that is handy but not vital is a wooden rack of some sort to hang your links on, as sausage links need to tighten in the skins at room temperature for a while, and then "bloom" overnight in the fridge.

Before You Start: Get Your Ingredients and Equipment Cold

The first thing you need to know is that you want your ingredients all laid out and at the right temperature BEFORE you begin. Start by making sure the meat and fat is extremely cold by putting it in the freezer for an hour or two. You can even use fat straight from the freezer, as frozen fat cuts better. Why the emphasis on temperature? Think of it like pie dough, where you want the butter to stay separate from the dough – if the butter gets too hot, it ruins it. Same with sausage. You really, really want to avoid "smear."

A good way to tell if your sausage meat and fat are cold enough is if your hands start to hurt and go numb while handling it. You are looking for as close to 32 degrees as you can get without actually freezing the meat – using pre-frozen meat is fine, but you if you then refreeze it, it will suffer greatly in quality.

This carries through to your equipment. Put your bowls and your grinder in the freezer or at least the refrigerator for at least an hour before using them. I can't say it enough: Cold, cold, cold.

You also need to be prepared to spend a few hours on this project. Under pressure, I can make a 5-pound batch in an hour, and pros are even faster than I am. But when I first started it took me several hours. Don't have anything planned and leave distractions behind. You get breaks in the middle of this process, so worry not.

How to Make Homemade Sausage Recipe

Ingredients

Hank's Sweet Italian Sausage

4 pounds pork shoulder

1 pound pork fat

40 grams kosher salt

35 grams sugar

20 grams toasted fennel seeds

6 grams cracked black pepper

4 grams ground nutmeg

1 cup minced fresh parsley

1 head garlic, peeled and chopped

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup dry sherry

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup sherry vinegar

Special Equipment Needed for basic sausage

Meat grinder with coarse and fine dies - either KitchenAid with grinder attachment, a stand-alone grinder, or an old fashioned hand-cranked meat grinder

Additional Equipment Needed for Stuffed Sausage Links

- Casings - hog casings
- Sausage stuffer
- Wooden rack to hang sausages to dry

Method

Making Bulk Sausage

1 Make sure your ingredients are laid out, and the meat and fat are very cold (fat can be completely frozen), before you begin (put meat and fat in freezer for 2 hours). Put bowls and grinder in freezer or refrigerator for an hour before using them.



2 Prepare a large bowl of ice and put a medium metal bowl on top of it. Slice your meat and fat into chunks between an inch and two inches across. Cut your fat a little smaller than your meat. To keep your ingredients cold, put your cut meat and fat into the bowl set into a larger bowl filled with ice.



3 When the meat and fat are cut, mix them quickly. Pour in most of your spices; I leave out a tablespoon or two of fennel seeds and a tablespoon of black pepper for later. Mix quickly. Add the salt and the sugar and mix one more time. Put into a covered container or top the bowl with plastic wrap and put the sausage mixture into the freezer for at least 30 minutes and no more than an hour. Now you can call back whoever might have bothered you when you started this process.

4 Meanwhile, mix $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sherry vinegar and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of dry sherry and put it in the fridge. I know sherry is not traditional in Italian sausage. You can use white wine and white wine vinegar if you'd rather (I save red wine and red wine vinegar for the hot sausages).



5 If you plan on stuffing your sausage, take out some of the casings (you need about 15-18 feet for a 5-pound batch of links) and immerse them in warm water. (If you are not planning on stuffing your sausage, you can skip this step.)

6 After your sausage mixture has chilled, remove your grinder from the freezer and set it up. I use the coarse die for Italian sausage, but you could use either. Do not use a very fine die, because to do this properly you typically need to grind the meat coarse first, then re-chill it, then grind again with the fine die. Besides, an Italian sausage is supposed to be rustic.





7 Push the sausage mixture through the grinder, working quickly. If you use the KitchenAid attachment, use it on level 4. Make sure the ground meat falls into a cold bowl. When all the meat is ground, put it back in the freezer and clean up the grinder and work area.



8 When you've cleaned up, take the mixture back out and add the remaining spices and the sherry-sherry vinegar mixture. Using the paddle attachment to a stand mixer (or a stout wooden spoon, or your VERY clean hands), mix the sausage well. With a stand mixer set on level 1, let this go for 90 seconds. It might take a little longer with the spoon or hands. You want the mixture to get a little sticky and begin to bind to itself – it is a lot like what happens when you knead bread.



When this is done, you have sausage. You are done if you are not making links. To cook, take a scoop and form into a ball with your hands. Flatten out a bit. Cook on medium low heat in a skillet for 5-10 minutes each side until browned and cooked through.

Additional Steps for Making Links



9 If you are making links, put the mixture back in the freezer and clean up again. Bring out your sausage stuffer, which should have been in the freezer or refrigerator. Run warm water through your sausage casings. This makes them easier to put on the stuffer tube and lets you know if there are any holes in the casings. Be sure to lay one edge of the flushed casings over the edge of the bowl of warm water they were in; this helps you grab them easily when you need them.



10 Slip a casing onto the stuffing tube (And yes, it is exactly like what you think it is). Leave a “tail” of at least 6 inches off the end of the tube: You need this to tie off later.

11 Take the meat from the freezer one last time and stuff it into the stuffer. If all the meat will not fit, keep it in a bowl over another bowl filled with ice, or in the fridge while you stuff in batches. Start cranking the stuffer down. Air should be the first thing that emerges – this is why you do not tie off the casing right off the bat.



12 When the meat starts to come out, use one hand to regulate how fast the casing slips off the tube; it’s a little tricky at first, but you will get the hang of it. Let the sausage come out in one long coil; you will

make links later. Remember to leave 6-10 inches of “tail” at the other end of the casing. Sometimes one really long hog casing is all you need for a 5-pound batch. When the sausage is all in the casings, tie off the one end in a double knot. You could also use fine butcher’s twine.



13 With two hands, pinch off what will become two links. Work the links so they are pretty tight: You want any air bubbles to force their way to the edge of the sausage. Then spin the link you have between your fingers away from you several times. Repeat this process down the coil, only on this next link, spin it towards you several times. Continue this way, alternating, until you get to the end of the coil. Tie off the other end.



14 Almost done. Time to hang your sausages. Hang them on the rack so they don’t touch (too much), and find yourself a needle. Sterilize it by putting into a gas flame or somesuch, then look for air bubbles in the links. Prick them with the needle, and in most cases the casing will flatten itself against the link.

15 Let these dry for an hour or two, then put them in a large container in the fridge overnight, with paper towels underneath. Package them up or eat them the next day. They will keep for a week, but freeze those that will not be used by then.

Yield: Makes 5 lbs of sausage, or about 15-20 links.