

A few years ago, if you'd called your restaurant Lardo you'd probably have been considered bonkers. Lard was a four-letter word guaranteed to send us recoiling in horror at visions of clogged arteries and playground fannies. If there was one food reviled and derided above all others, lard won hands down. Now, though, a restaurant in Hackney, east London, has named itself after the wicked white stuff, arguing that lard might actually be one of the tastiest foods around. The most popular pizza that Lardo hatches in the igloo-shaped wood-fired oven at its heart is its Lardo, Marjoram and Rocket, a pizza draped with paper-thin slivers of lardo, the Italian word for cured pig back-fat, and doused with a marjoram dressing and some rocket leaves. Also flying off the menu is Lardy Loin – aromatic melt-in-the-mouth slices of lardo with a smidgen of loin, served with yummy fingers of freshly baked focaccia. We're learning to love lard once more, it seems.

"The best lard comes from many of the heritage-breed pigs that we've devalued," says Eliza Flanagan, Lardo's owner. To drive home the message, the restaurant's postcard is a close-up of the free-range pigs that provide its charcuterie: Mangalitzas whose long curly locks make them look more like sheep than pigs. "I am not a sheep," the caption helpfully informs diners.

Our ancestors, of course, had no trouble recognising the virtues of lard. So central was it to our diet that the room where we stored our food, the larder, was named after it. Many British households kept a family pig, so the fat you used over winter was good old lard – as it still is in many countries today. Its great strength was that it coaxed out the flavours of foods that it was cooked with. In pig-rearing counties such as Wiltshire, housewives threw the fat into scrumptious lardy cakes, which are happily seeing a quiet revival.

The loveliest lard is from fat found inside the loin and around the kidneys, known as flare or leaf fat. That's rendered then left to solidify into blocks of crystalline white fat. It's so pure and malleable that a museum in Ukraine has used it to make more than 30 lard sculptures – including a particularly appetising one of Marilyn Monroe's ample lips and breasts.

Lard, with its high smoking point and unobtrusive taste, was the ideal fat for roasting, so our grannies roasted their potatoes in it. Today, home cooks are cottoning on to goose and duck fat, now sold in fancy jars in delis and supermarkets at vast expense, but they still struggle with using our native pork fat – perhaps because it's not yet packaged poshly.

It's also in short supply – and much of what's around is channelled into cosmetics and soaps. "Proper lard is difficult to find," says charcutier Graham Waddington whose Gloucestershire-based company Native Breeds crafts Lardo's

lardo. "You'd need to buy pork fat from a butcher and render it yourself. But these days few butchers have any to sell."

Waddington dismisses the highly processed lard sold in supermarkets, often hydrogenated and treated with bleaching and

Praise the LARD

It's unbeatable in pastry and delicious with a roast. No wonder the pork fat – along with its gourmet cousin, lardo – is having a revival says Claire Hargreaves

IT'S A GREAT INGREDIENT – IT'S UP THERE WITH GOOSE AND DUCK FAT



The white stuff: pizza is topped with wafer-thin slivers of lardo (top right) at Lardo restaurant RICHARD MILDENHALL/GETTY

deodorising agents. One reason we can't get pork fat in Britain, says Waddington, is that pigs are now bred to have as little fat as possible.

"Our demonisation of fat has meant that in recent decades farmers have mainly produced lean, fast-growing breeds such as Hampshire and Duroc. They're slaughtered at around five months, which doesn't allow time for them to develop a proper layer of fat." Instead, Waddington uses slow-growing heritage breeds such as Mangalitzas or Saddleback that are reared to at least a year to give them time to develop a good fat covering.

Lard also has fantastic shortening qualities, hence its use in all types of pastry. A Melton Mowbray pork pie, for instance, must use lard in its hot-water pastry casing to qualify as the real thing. "The pastry is baked free-standing. As it cooks, the fat on the outer layers of the pastry

burns off, giving it a crisp crunch that you experience as you eat it," says Matthew O'Callaghan, chairman of the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie Association and a food historian.

If you watched *The Great British Bake Off* you'll also have seen lard hailed as a must-use ingredient in puddings and cakes. On the series, O'Callaghan demonstrated how to make the perfect spotted dick – using lard. "Lard has a low melting point so after a cake has cooked it solidifies quickly, trapping in the air," he says. "If you want the lightest, fluffiest cakes and puddings, use lard. People think lardy cake is heavy. Actually, it's surprisingly light."

Chefs, such as Jeremy Lee at Soho's Quo Vadis, vigorously champion lard for roasting potatoes and in pastry. "Lard is up there with goose and duck fat – it's a very sophisticated ingredient," Lee says. Lard also has great preserving qualities

LARDY CAKE

By Daniel Stevens

250g strong white bread flour, plus extra for dusting
150ml warm water
5g powdered dried yeast
5g salt
160g lard
50g sultanas
50g currants
50g chopped candied peel
50g caster sugar
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (ideally freshly ground in a spice mill)

Put the flour, water, yeast and salt into a bowl and mix to a soft dough. Melt 10g of the lard and incorporate it into the dough, then turn out on to a floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic. Put into a clean bowl, cover



and leave to rise until doubled in size.

In a separate bowl, toss the dried fruit and candied peel together with the sugar and cinnamon. Cut the rest of the lard into small dice.

Tip the dough out on to a clean work surface and press all over with your fingertips to deflate. Roll out to a rectangle, about 1cm thick. Scatter over half of the dried fruit mixture and lard pieces, then roll up from a short side to enclose the filling. Give the dough a quarter-turn and roll it out again to a rectangle, as before. Scatter over the remaining fruit and lard and roll up again. Now roll out the dough to a 20cm square and place in a greased deep 20cm square baking tin. Leave to rise for another 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 200°C/Gas Mark 6. Bake the lardy cake for 30-40 minutes until well risen and golden brown. Leave to cool slightly in the tin for 10-15 minutes, then invert on to a wire rack to finish cooling. Placing the lardy cake upside down will allow the melted lard to be reabsorbed into the dough as it cools. Serve warm or cold, cut into slices.

From *'The River Cottage Bread Handbook'* (Bloomsbury, £14.99)



WHAT TO USE LARD AND LARDO FOR

LARD
Roast potatoes, Yorkshire puddings, toad in the hole

In all types of pastry. Some cooks combine with butter

Lardy cake (see recipe, left), sponge cakes and puddings, including spotted dick

Confits

Croutons

Do as the Germans and eastern Europeans do and enjoy dry-rendered lard as a spread on bread or in sandwiches

LARDO
Eat slivers on hot toast, as an antipasto

Tie over dry meats such as pheasant and turkey when roasting to provide moisture and flavour

Drape slithers over fish, scallops or langoustines

Wrap around prunes or figs to make devils on horseback with a difference

Toss pieces into pasta or rice

Wrap terrines in slices of lardo



Customers get very grumpy if we take our Lardo pizza off the menu."

If you're reaching for the extra-virgin olive oil in horror at all of this, you might not need to. Recent research is questioning the received wisdom that animal fats are the main cause of obesity and that we should eat vegetable oils instead, and carbs rather than fats. A book by the American science journalist Gary Taubes quotes US government figures showing that nearly half the fat in lard is monounsaturated.

Monounsaturated fat raises HDL ("good") cholesterol and lowers LDL ("bad") cholesterol, and 90 per cent of that fat is the same oleic acid that's in olive oil. "If you replace the carbohydrates in your diet with an equal quantity of lard, it will actually reduce your risk of having a heart attack," claims Taubes. Unsurprisingly, UK Government advice does not agree. Yet.



What's for supper? Slow-roasted lamb shoulder by Ash Mair

INGREDIENTS TO SERVE 4

7 sprigs or rosemary
125ml extra virgin olive oil
4 garlic cloves, peeled
500g small round golden shallots
50g sugar
100ml sherry vinegar
500ml chicken stock
1.2kg boneless shoulder of lamb
Coarse sea salt
6 salted anchovy fillets in oil, chopped
30g salted butter
2 x 400g cans of cooked butter beans, drained and rinsed

To make the rosemary oil, strip the leaves from 2 sprigs of rosemary and put in a blender with the olive oil and a clove of garlic. Pulse a few times to roughly chop, pour into a bowl and set aside at room temperature to steep.

Preheat the oven to 120°C/gas mark 1/2. Peel the shallots leaving the root end attached. Heat olive oil in a frying pan over high heat, add the shallots and sauté until golden all over. Add the sugar and sherry vinegar and cook until the vinegar has reduced and the shallots are covered with a shiny glaze. Pour into a deep baking dish, add the remaining garlic cloves and rosemary and pour over the stock.

In a clean frying pan heat a glug of olive oil. Season the lamb all over with salt and sear on all sides until well coloured. Place the lamb on top of the shallots skin side up and spread the chopped anchovy over the skin. Use a large piece of aluminium foil to wrap the tray, making sure the foil doesn't touch the lamb. Scrunch the foil around the edges of the tray tightly so none of the liquid evaporates during cooking. Bake for 4 hours 30 minutes. Fifteen minutes before the end of cooking, remove the foil and cook the lamb, uncovered, for another 15 minutes. Meanwhile in a pan, melt the butter. Add the beans, 200ml of water and a good sprinkling of salt and, using a potato masher, smash up the beans and place in a serving dish.

Pass the rosemary oil through a fine sieve, discarding the solids, and pour over the butter beans.

Remove the lamb from the oven and using a plate as a scoop, transfer to a serving dish.

Remove the shallots and place around the lamb, skimming any fat off the liquid remaining in the baking tray. Place the tray over a high heat and bring to the boil and reduce till thickened slightly before pouring over the lamb.

Taken from *'My Basque Cuisine'* by Ash Mair (New Holland, £19.99)
Photograph by Jean Cazals