

# **Beyond Pork Tradition: Exploring Nontraditional Pork Pairings**

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Pork's mild sweetness and delicious fat content make it a canvas for more than just the time-honored combinations that likely form many of our family food memories, but also for inventive, less conventional pairings. By understanding the same principles that explain why traditional pairings work (contrast, complement and enhancement) we can push pork into new and exciting territory.

## **Coffee and Cocoa**

One of my wife and I's first culinary creations together was a chocolate and coffee rub for pork and beef, so this is a personal favorite place to start. It's true that coffee and cocoa are rarely associated with pork classically, but their roasted, bitter notes create an elegant counterpoint to the meat's sweetness and richness (somewhat like adding milk and sugar to chocolate). A coffee rub on pork shoulder or a dark cocoa infusion in a braising liquid produces complexity like the balance of sweet and bitter we find in good dark chocolate. In addition, many of the flavors in coffee mirror the Maillard Reaction flavors from seared pork, creating a flavor resonance.

## **Tropical Fruits: Pineapple, Mango, Guava, Passionfruit**

Whereas apples and pears bring sweetness, tropical fruits can add sharper acidity and brighter aromas. Pineapple enzymes also tenderize pork while lending that tangy edge that can cut through fattier cuts like ribs or belly. Passionfruit glaze on grilled tenderloin or mango salsa alongside carnitas showcases how tropical fruits can elevate pork's natural sweetness without overwhelming it.

## **Exotic Spices: Cardamom, Star Anise, Szechuan Peppercorn**

Szechuan peppercorn's citrusy, tingling spice, or the floral taste/smell of green cardamom, can transform a simple pork dish into something unexpected. These spices work because they interact with pork's richness the same way sage or rosemary does – offering aromatic contrast. Star anise, in particular, amplifies pork's sweetness much like fennel does in Italian sausage but with a more exotic (to the Midwestern palette) licorice like edge.

## **Ferments and Funk: Miso, Kimchi and Fish Sauce**

In the Wausau area, where I teach culinary arts, we are blessed with a large, culinarily active, Hmong population. This gives us access to and experience with some fantastic

ingredients that exploit umami flavor to really compliment pork. Fermented ingredients bring umami intensity and complexity; a miso marinade on pork chops or a splash of fish sauce on braised pork shoulder can create savory depth that resonates with that subtle pork sweetness. Kimchi's bright acidity and chili heat cut through fat while the lactic tang from fermentation contrasts with the richness of pork.

The success of these nontraditional pairings lies in the same principles as the classics. Contrast, Compliment and Enhancement. Bright acid or bitter notes contrast or counter pork's richness. Aromatics or umami amplify and compliment pork's sweetness. And roasted, fermented or tropical flavors echo the natural notes already present in the meat, enhancing those characteristics.

Pork's adaptability means we aren't bound by tradition. By applying the same flavor logic behind apples and sage we can confidently explore coffee rubs, tropical glazes or miso marinades, maybe creating new family favorites for the ages.