

BRAISING AND STEWING

Some of the best meals can be made with less expensive ingredients. Slow cooking, otherwise known as braising and stewing, is the secret to much great food. While both braising and stewing involve long, slow cooking in liquid, the main difference is that braised foods lie not quite submerged in liquid, so that they both stew and steam and the same time. Stewing involves submerging ingredients in a liquid and simmering the mixture for a long time. Larger cuts of meat tend to be braised—think pot roast—while cut up meat is stewed. Many cooks like to do their braising and stewing the day before, and reheat and serve the following day. The flavors are actually more pronounced the next day.

The traditional braised meat is a pot roast. It's a great way to use a more muscular, tougher and cheaper cut of meat, like chuck or brisket. The technique is quite simple. A large cut of meat, such as beef or lamb or even chicken, is first browned on both sides, then braised in liquid, usually stock, wine or even beer, flavored with herbs or spices, for about three hours. Often vegetables are added towards the end of the cooking time. The only equipment you need is a large Dutch oven, a chef's knife and a cutting board.

Here's how to make a basic pot roast. Peel and chop about two large onions and 3 or 4 cloves of garlic. Heat a couple of tablespoons of cooking oil in a large Dutch oven over high heat, and when hot, add about a 3 to 4 pound brisket of beef. Brown the beef on both sides, about 7-8 minutes, letting it come to a golden brown without burning. Take the meat out and put it on a large plate. Turn down the heat to medium and add the onions and garlic and sauté until the onions are lightly browned, stirring often.

Put the beef back in the pot and add half a cup of wine, either red or white, and half a cup of water, along with a bay leaf, about ¼ teaspoon of dried thyme, and some salt and freshly ground black pepper. Bring the liquid to a boil, cover, then turn the heat down and simmer for about 2 ½ to 3 hours, turning the meat from time to time and adding about ½ to 1 cup more water as the liquid evaporates.

About 10 minutes before the end of the cooking time, add 3 large carrots, peeled and trimmed and cut into 2-inch lengths, and about 4 large Idaho potatoes, peeled and cut into large bite-sized chunks. When the meat is so tender you can easily pierce it with a fork, take it out and put in back on its plate and cover it with aluminum foil, letting it "rest" for 10 to 15 minutes. This lets the juices redistribute themselves more evenly throughout the meat. Keep cooking the carrots and potatoes for another 10 minutes or so, until they're tender.

To serve, slice the beef cross-wise, across the grain. (If you cut with the grain you'll end up shredding the meat.) Put the slices on a serving platter with the vegetables scattered around them. Carefully spoon off as much fat from the cooking liquid as you reasonably can, and spoon the juices over the meat and vegetables. Sprinkle the dish with some chopped Italian flat-leaf parsley and serve. All you need to make an excellent dinner is a mixed green salad and some hearty country bread, plus some of the wine that went into the sauce.

By the way, only cook with wine you'd enjoy drinking. It doesn't have to be the most expensive wine in your house, by any means, but it should be something that you wouldn't mind drinking. Bottles labeled "cooking wine" are cheap wine with added salt. Don't ever use it. All sorts of wine can be used in cooking, including the fortified wines like Madeira, port, sherry and marsala.

If the meat is still tough after the cooking time, take the veggies out with a slotted spoon and put them in a bowl. Just keep cooking the meat longer, adding more liquid if necessary. Every cook has had a pot roast that took forever to cook, which is one reason many cooks like to cook the pot roast the day before rather than risk a 9:00 dinner. If your sauce is a little flat, add a little more salt and pepper, or even a squeeze of lemon juice. If the sauce is too thin, blend a tablespoon of flour with a tablespoon of water. Mix this with about a cup of the cooking liquid, then return the entire mixture to the pot. Stir well and heat slowly for a few minutes until thickened. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.