

CHOUCROUTE GARNIE

One dish that lends itself to strong feelings is sauerkraut—Germany's contribution to pickled cabbage. (Don't complain—have you tried Korean *kim chee*?) While I realize this opinion is not shared by all, I happen to be one who is in favor of sauerkraut. And it's not just something you spoon on top of a hot dog. Here's an up-market fancy way of serving sauerkraut that will make even the most skeptical of you into an advocate. Now I'm not making the sauerkraut itself—that's a long production, and besides, I'm not German. But I CAN make it awfully tasty. Here's how to do it.

First of all, buy a jar or plastic bag of sauerkraut—Clausen's is an excellent brand and the jars or bags of sauerkraut are often found in the refrigerator case of your local supermarket. Don't use canned sauerkraut—it has an evil, metallic taste that nothing can help. You'll also need about two smoked pork chops and a couple of good Polish sausages or kielbasa, a medium white onion, and a green apple like a Granny Smith or Pippin.

Peel and slice the onion into fairly fine slices. Peel and core the apple and chop it up into pieces about the size of your thumbnail. Melt about a tablespoon of butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. While the butter is melting, crush two or three juniper berries (available in your supermarket's spice section) with a rolling pin or the bottom of a frying pan. When the butter stops foaming, drop the crushed juniper berries into the butter and stir for ten seconds or so. (Some people also add about half a teaspoon of caraway seeds, but as I don't like the flavor and they get stuck in your teeth, I leave them out.)

Then add the onion and sauté until the onion softens—you don't want it to brown. When the onion softens, add the apple pieces and stir, along with a pinch or two of salt and a sprinkle of white pepper or a couple of twists of freshly grated black pepper. Then empty the bag or jar of sauerkraut into a strainer and drain. For a milder flavor, rinse the sauerkraut with cold water. Add the sauerkraut to the saucepan, stir well, and add about two-thirds of a cup of dry white wine or chicken broth—or even apple juice for a sweeter flavor.

Cover the pot, turn down the heat and simmer for about 20 minutes. Cut the kielbasa into thirds and the smoked pork chops into halves, and push the meat down into the sauerkraut to heat up. Continue cooking on low for another 10 minutes or so, then serve, with a German deli-style or Dijon mustard for the meat. This serves two hearty or three regular appetites.

This is actually an Alsatian version of sauerkraut, from the border between France and Germany, and goes by the fancy name of *choucroute garnie*. It sounds better that way. I like to serve some steamed new potatoes with a little chopped fresh dill or parsley on them along with the meat and sauerkraut. To drink, I'd either go with the white wine you started with, or this is a time that a good beer would make an excellent accompaniment—particularly a moderately full-bodied chilled lager or even an amber.

I've actually served this dish to company and received excellent reviews from my surprised guests who never thought they'd be eating sauerkraut at my house! For dessert, at this time of year I'd serve some sliced strawberries dressed with a little really good balsamic vinegar, or a selection of some good cheeses, including a soft ripe cheese like a Camebert or a Brie or St. Andre, plus a good cheddar-style cheese like my favorite, double-Gloucester, a chevre or goats milk cheese, and a blue cheese like Stilton or the wonderful blue Gouda I've recently discovered at Andrae's Bakery in Amador City.

Don't forget to visit the Amador Farmers Markets in Sutter Creek and Pine Grove. Although supermarket produce has improved immensely in the past few years, there's still nothing like the freshness and variety of the fruits and veggies you can find at a Farmers Market. This is Steve Muni for the K-Nugget Kitchen.