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Prep School: Learn to Braise

As the weather cools down, we crave tender braised meats and vegetables with satisfying sauces. The technique of braising is exceptionally versatile—you can cook the food using a classic Dutch oven or an electric slow cooker, and you can prepare both comforting weeknight dinners as well as fancier fare for dinner parties.

What Is Braising?

Simmering food slowly in a moderate amount of liquid is a technique known as braising. Relatively tough cuts of meat, such as chuck roast and brisket, and fibrous vegetables, such as carrots, celery and leeks, are excellent candidates for braising. The braising liquid can be water or a more flavorful liquid, such as broth, stock, wine or beer. Onions, garlic, herbs or other ingredients are often added to the liquid for flavoring. Braising and stewing are closely related, although stews are made with more liquid and smaller pieces of food.

Meat to be braised is generally first browned in fat to give it color and add to its taste. It is then cooked in a relatively small amount of liquid (usually only 1 to 2 inches deep) in a tightly closed pot or baking dish on the top of the stove over medium-low to medium heat or in a moderate (325° to 350°F) oven. The lid prevents liquid from evaporating, and the food is quickly surrounded by steam.

Braising results in tender, full-flavored dishes that are typically hearty, cold-weather fare. Some favorite braised dishes are pot roast, coq au vin and lamb shanks.

In classic French-style braising, the vegetables that are cooked with the meat or poultry to impart their aromatic flavors are not necessarily served. Instead, fresh vegetables may be added toward the end of cooking for the benefit of their fresher color, texture and flavor.

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Balsamic Quick-Braised Pork Chops

4 bone-in pork chops, each 1 inch thick
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
1 Tbs. olive oil
4 bacon slices, diced
1 red onion, sliced ¼ inch thick
1 garlic clove, minced
2 Tbs. firmly packed dark brown sugar
½ cup balsamic vinegar
1 tsp. minced fresh thyme
1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
2 tsp. chicken demi-glace
Fresh rosemary leaves for garnish

Seasoned with balsamic vinegar, bacon and fresh thyme, these pork chops come together quickly. They're perfect for a weeknight supper with the family or a dinner for guests.

Season the pork chops with salt and pepper. In a large sauté pan over medium-high heat, warm the olive oil. Add the pork chops and sear, turning once, until golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate.

In the same pan over medium heat, cook the bacon until crispy, 5 to 8 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate. Pour off all but 1 Tbs. of the fat in the pan.

Reduce the heat to medium-low, add the onion and partially cover the pan. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is caramelized and tender, 10 to 12 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds. Stir in the brown sugar, vinegar, thyme and bacon. Increase the heat to medium and cook until the liquid is thickened and reduced by half, 10 to 12 minutes. Stir in the broth and demi-glace and bring the sauce to a simmer.

Return the pork chops to the pan. Cook, uncovered, coating the chops with the sauce, for 10 to 12 minutes. Garnish with the rosemary leaves and serve immediately. Serves 4.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen

Creamy Long-Cooked Collards

4 oz. sliced bacon
2 medium onions, sliced
2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 tsp. kosher salt, plus more, to taste
½ tsp. freshly ground pepper, plus more, to taste
1 cup water
¼ cup apple cider vinegar
2 Tbs. light or dark brown sugar
2½ lb. collard greens, thick stems discarded and leaves coarsely chopped
1 ham hock, halved
1 cup heavy cream

Collard greens are hearty and full of flavor. This recipe treats them in a classic Southern way by braising them with a ham hock until they're supersoft and finishing the broth with some cream. The result is a satisfying side dish to any meat. That recipe is absolutely worth the time it takes to braise the greens; they cook until their texture becomes so silky that they melt in your mouth. Ask your butcher to cut the ham hock in half so the bone's exposed; you'll get even more meaty flavor out of it.

Cook the bacon in a heavy medium pot over medium heat, turning occasionally, until it is brown and crisp, about 8 minutes. Transfer the bacon to a paper towel to drain, reserving the fat in the pot.

Cook the onions and garlic in the bacon fat with the 1 tsp. salt and the ½ tsp. pepper, stirring occasionally, until the onions are brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Stir in the water, vinegar and brown sugar, scraping up any browned bits. Add the collards and ham hock. Cover the pot and cook, stirring occasionally, until the collards are silky and very tender, about 40 minutes. Stir in the cream, bring to a boil and boil until the liquid is almost completely evaporated, about 15 minutes. Remove the ham hock from the pot and place on a cutting board. Remove any meat from the ham hock, discarding the bones. Chop the meat, then add the ham to the collards. Season the collards with salt and pepper. Crumble the bacon over the collards and serve. Serves 6.

Adapted from *The Farm*, by Ian Knauer (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

Tips and Tricks

Cuts for Braising: Braised recipes usually call for pieces of poultry, tougher cuts of beef and pork and fibrous vegetables. Bone-in cuts of poultry are best, as they are the most flavorful.

Choosing Pots: The best pots for braising are heavy ones with even heat distribution and heat retention to allow for slow, uniform cooking. Braising usually calls for browning or caramelizing the food and then adding the liquid (usually about halfway up the sides of the meat and vegetables) and allowing the dish to cook slowly.

Your cooking vessel must be able to distribute the heat evenly throughout the pan to create a protected environment for long periods of time. A tight-fitting lid is critical so the liquid and ingredients will concentrate in flavor. The right pot can make the difference between tender, succulent meat with a delicious sauce and unevenly cooked meat that is not completely tender, as well as a sauce that could be either reduced so much that it is nonexistent or tastes burnt.

Browning: Browning meats or vegetables in oil before braising in liquid caramelizes the natural sugars, creating a rich surface color and deep flavor. Do not skip this step. Resist the temptation to lift pieces up every few seconds, which will interfere with the browning process; this can result in a loss of moisture and cause the food to stick to the pan.

Flambéing Safety: Adding wines and other liquors to braised dishes lends great flavor but be sure to do this safely. When flambéing, always transfer the wine, brandy or other liquor from its original bottle to another container before pouring it into the pan. The flame can travel into the bottle and cause it to burst. Also, remove the pan from the heat when pouring in the liquor, especially if using a gas stove. Keep pot holders and towels well out of reach of the flames.

Reducing Liquids: An important step in braising is reducing the cooking liquid. This typically involves simmering the liquid briskly for several minutes, reducing its volume, concentrating its flavor and thickening its body. This process will also evaporate some of the alcohol content of the wine or spirits, eliminating their sometimes harsh edge and bringing out their flavor.

Using Leftovers: One of the biggest benefits of braising is that dishes often taste better the next day—a boon to the busy cook. Cool the dish to room temperature, transfer it to an airtight container, and then label clearly with the contents and date. Rewarm dishes over medium-low heat until thoroughly heated through before serving. Use within 3 or 4 days.

1 chicken, 4 to 4½ lb., backbone removed, chicken cut into 10 pieces

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

1 Tbs. unsalted butter

3 Tbs. olive oil

2 yellow onions, diced

1 carrot, peeled and diced

2 celery stalks, diced

¾ cup white wine

4½ cups chicken stock, plus more as needed

6 bay leaves

4 oz. bacon, diced

2 cups fresh corn kernels

1½ cups sliced okra

1 small shallot, finely diced

1½ Tbs. minced garlic

8 oz. dried navy beans, soaked in water overnight and drained

8 oz. dried black-eyed peas, soaked in water overnight and drained

3 Tbs. chopped fresh chives

Lemon wedges for serving

Braised Chicken with Succotash

At bluestem restaurant in Kansas City, Missouri, chef Colby Garrelts combines artful presentation with the best local and seasonal foods available. This chicken recipe showcases one of his favorite cooking techniques, both in his restaurant and at home: braising.

Preheat an oven to 350°F.

Season the chicken with salt and pepper. In a 7¼-quart Dutch oven over medium-high heat, melt the butter with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil. Working in batches, sear the chicken until golden, 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to a platter. Reduce the heat to medium and add half of the onions and all of the carrot and celery. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Add the wine, scraping up the browned bits, and simmer until the liquid is reduced by half, about 4 minutes.

Return the chicken to the pot and add 2 cups of the stock. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a boil. Add 3 of the bay leaves. Cover the pot, transfer to the oven and cook until the chicken is cooked through, about 1 hour. Transfer the chicken to a platter. Strain the cooking liquid through a fine-mesh sieve and reserve; you should have about 3 cups.

Set the Dutch oven over high heat and warm the remaining 2 Tbs. oil. Cook the bacon until the fat is rendered, about 5 minutes. Add the remaining onions and sauté until tender, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the corn, okra, shallot, garlic and the remaining 3 bay leaves. Cook, stirring occasionally, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the navy beans and black-eyed peas and cook, stirring occasionally, for 3 minutes. Add the reserved cooking liquid plus enough stock to cover the beans by about ½ inch. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, cover and cook for 40 minutes. Uncover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the beans are tender, about 40 minutes more. Season with salt and pepper.

Return the chicken to the pot, cover and cook until the chicken is warmed through, 10 to 12 minutes. Discard the bay leaves. Stir in the chives. Serve from the Dutch oven and pass lemon wedges at the table. Serves 6 to 8.

Adapted from a recipe by Colby Garrelts, Chef, bluestem, Kansas City, MO.

8 oz. sliced bacon

1 yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced

½ head red cabbage, quartered, cored and thinly sliced lengthwise

3 carrots, peeled and grated (about 2 cups)

2 cups dry white wine

3 Tbs. white wine vinegar

3 juniper berries, crushed

1 bay leaf

Salt, to taste

1 Tbs. brown sugar

2 Tbs. unsalted butter

Braised Cabbage with Carrots and Bacon

Max and Eli Sussman took a cue from the mom movement “I’ll try anything to get my kids to eat vegetables.” Bacon makes even the most insufferably veggie-phobic people consider taking a bite. And that one bite is all you’ll need to convince them.

In a large fry pan over medium-low heat, cook the bacon until crisp, turning the strips often so they cook evenly and to render the most fat, 10 to 15 minutes. Using tongs, transfer to paper towels to drain. Crumble the bacon and set aside.

Pour off all but 2 Tbs. of the fat in the pan and place over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté until tender and lightly golden, about 10 minutes. Add the cabbage, carrots, wine, vinegar, juniper berries, bay leaf and salt and stir. Your pan might be quite full, but don’t worry, the cabbage will shrink a lot as it cooks and you’ll have more room to mix well. Increase the heat to high and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and maintain a gentle simmer. Stir in the brown sugar.

Cover the pan and simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated and the vegetables are tender, about 45 minutes. Discard the bay leaf. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt. Add the butter and stir to melt. (This finishes the dish by uniting the flavors and adding a little nice gloss to the sauce.) Transfer to a serving bowl or individual plates, garnish with the crispy bacon bits and serve immediately. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from *This is a Cookbook*, by Max Sussman and Eli Sussman (Olive Press, 2012).