

In the same pan over medium heat, add the onions, carrots, celery and garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Slow-cooker method: Transfer the short ribs and vegetables to a slow cooker and add the stout. Cover and cook according to the manufacturer’s instructions until the meat is very tender, about 6 hours.

Oven method: Preheat an oven to 300°F. Transfer the short ribs and vegetables to a Dutch oven and add the stout. Cover the pot with aluminum foil and place the lid on top. Transfer to the oven and bake until the meat is very tender, about 4 hours.

Transfer the ribs to a large bowl and cover with aluminum foil. Skim the fat off the sauce. Using an immersion blender, puree the sauce until smooth.

Transfer the ribs to individual bowls. Spoon the sauce on top and garnish each serving with a parsley sprig. Serve immediately. Serves 8.

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Pork Ragù

Mushroom demi-glace adds depth of flavor to this pork ragù, which is braised in a slow cooker until the meat is meltingly tender. The ragù is served over wide pasta noodles known as pappardelle to create a hearty one-pot meal.

Season the pork with salt and pepper. Dredge the pork in the flour, shaking off the excess. In the stovetop-safe insert of a slow cooker or in a large fry pan over medium-high heat, warm 2 Tbs. of the olive oil. Working in batches, brown the pork on all sides, about 8 minutes per batch. Transfer the pork to a platter.

Reduce the heat to medium, add the pancetta to the insert or pan and cook, stirring occasionally, until browned, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the onion, carrots and fennel and cook, stirring occasionally, until tender, 5 to 6 minutes. Add the garlic and cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Transfer to a bowl.

Increase the heat to medium-high and warm the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil. Add the mushrooms to the insert or pan and cook, stirring occasionally, until browned, about 15 minutes. Transfer to a bowl. Add the tomatoes, demi-glace, tomato paste, wine and broth to the insert or pan and bring to a simmer. If using a slow-cooker insert, transfer it to the slow-cooker base and add the pork, pancetta mixture and mushrooms. If using a fry pan, transfer the contents of the pan to a regular slow cooker and add the pork, pancetta mixture and mushrooms. Cover and cook on high according to the manufacturer’s instructions until the pork is very tender, about 5 hours.

Fold the pasta into the ragù and sprinkle with parsley. Divide the pasta and sauce among individual bowls and serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.

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Popular Cuts of Meat for Slow Cooking

Beef

Chuck/Pot Roast
Round/Rump Roast
Arm Roast
Brisket
Short Ribs

Pork

Shoulder/Boston Shoulder
Butt/Rump

Lamb

Shanks

Slow Cooking

Slow cooking has a long history, stretching from the fire pits of prehistoric man to the cocottes of twenty-first-century French chefs. This cooking technique exposes food—often tougher cuts of meat—to low temperatures for long periods of time, with moisture playing a critical role, usually through the presence of stock, wine or other flavorful liquids.

The term “slow” is relative, depending on the main ingredient. For a lamb shank, it can mean a full day of simmering. For fish fillets or green vegetables, it may be no more than an hour or two of cooking. The uniform, gentle, moist heat that defines slow cooking can be achieved in a heavy lidded pan—typically a Dutch oven—on the stovetop or in the oven. But only an electric slow cooker can consistently and safely hold food at 200°F over many hours, rendering meat, poultry, vegetables, dried beans and grains tender and succulent. It offers big rewards for the busy home cook, who can prepare dinner quickly and easily early in the day, leave it to cook unattended while he or she is away, and then serve it hours later for dinner. Plus, many recipes for the slow cooker yield satisfying one-pot meals, eliminating the need to prepare two or more side dishes to round out the menu.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *The New Slow Cooker*, by Brigjt Binns (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

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Technique Class: Tough to Tender

Nowadays, home cooks routinely struggle to balance their busy lives with the need to put nutritious, tasty meals on the table. Many of them know that the slow cooker is a time-saver, but they may not know that it is also remarkably versatile and very budget friendly.

The Basics

To get the most out of your slow cooker, you will need to spend a little time preparing, seasoning and layering the ingredients—a handful of simple, quick steps that lead to memorable meals.

Seasoning: The first thing that every slow-cooker novice needs to know is that condensation forms on the underside of the lid while the food is cooking. This means that no liquid evaporates, as with many types of conventional cooking, and if not offset some way, it can result in a bland and watery dish. To compensate for the volume of liquid, start with flavorful stocks and/or wine and slightly increase the usual quantities of herbs and spices. If you are adapting a conventional recipe to the slow cooker, reduce the amount of liquid called for in the recipe by half and substitute a full-flavored stock for any water. When converting recipes for an electric slow cooker for the oven or stovetop, use the following rough guidelines: double the amount of liquid and halve the amount of spices or dried herbs. Salt and pepper should remain the same. Check the amount of liquid during cooking and add more if it seems too dry.

Preparing ingredients: Dense vegetables, such as potatoes, carrots and other root vegetables, take a long time to become tender in a slow cooker. To ensure they cook through, always cut them into chunks of about 1 inch or smaller. Trim as much fat as possible from meat and poultry before you add them to the cooker. This will save you time later when you need to skim the fat off the top of the braising juices. To help them retain their color, blanch assertive greens, such as collards and kale, in boiling water before you add them to the slow cooker.

Browning: This is a crucial flavor-building technique that can make the difference between an insipid result and a deeply flavored dish. Browning also contributes appealing color to a dish. You want the entire surface to have a deep, caramelized golden brown hue. The same is true for aromatic vegetables, especially onions, carrots and celery, which are usually sautéed in the same pan after the protein has been removed.

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Layering: If a recipe calls for dense, firm or starchy vegetables, such as carrots, potatoes or celery root, be sure to put them into the slow cooker’s insert first. Place meat or poultry and more tender vegetables on top. Occasionally, an ingredient will be added after an hour or more of cooking time has elapsed. Follow the recipe directions as to whether the ingredient should be stirred in or layered on top. Fish is often the last item added. In all cases, try to place pieces of the same ingredient in the slow cooker insert in an even layer so they will cook through at the same rate. When meat, such as beef shanks, must be stacked, arrange them in as few layers as possible.

Maintaining the temperature: Resist the urge to peek at the cooking food by lifting the lid, unless the directions instruct you to do so. Hot, moist air performs the cooking action, and every time you lift the lid, the slow cooker will take several minutes to return to the right temperature. This can affect the cooking time and also compromise safety. When slow cooking on the stovetop or in the oven, plan on about 1 hour at a gentle simmer on the stove or in the oven at 325°F for every 3 to 3½ hours in the slow cooker on the low setting.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *The New Slow Cooker*, by Brigit Binns (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

Garlicky Pork with Greens

Season the pork generously with salt and pepper. In a large, heavy fry pan over medium-high heat, warm the olive oil. When the oil is hot, working in batches if necessary to avoid crowding, add the pork and sear, turning as needed, until well browned on all sides, 6 to 7 minutes total. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the pork to a plate.

Pour off most of the fat from the pan and return it to medium-high heat. Add the onion and thyme and sauté until the onion is golden brown, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and rosemary and cook for 1 minute more. Pour in the wine and vinegar and stir to scrape up the browned bits from the pan bottom. Transfer the contents of the pan to a slow cooker. Add the stock and pork and stir to combine. Cover and cook on low according to the manufacturer’s instructions for 5 to 6 hours, stirring two or three times during the first 2 hours if possible. Stir in the kale, re-cover and cook for 30 minutes to 1 hour more. The pork and kale should be very tender.

Using a slotted spoon, divide the pork and kale among warmed individual plates. Using a large spoon, skim off the fat from the braising liquid, then drizzle some of the liquid over the meat. Top each serving with a large spoonful of the white bean salad. Serve immediately. Serves 6.

Add Flavor with White Bean Salad: In a bowl, combine 1 can (15 oz.) white beans, rinsed and drained; 3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil; 1 Tbs. red wine vinegar; 2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley; ¼ red onion, sliced paper-thin (about ¼ cup); ¼ tsp. salt; and several grinds of pepper. Stir well, then taste and adjust the seasonings.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *The New Slow Cooker*, by Brigit Binns (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

Mom’s Home-Style Pot Roast

Every mom seems to have her own secret on how to transform a modest chuck roast into a scrumptiously tender pot roast supper. Some add lots of carrots, while others favor parsnips or sweet potatoes. In this recipe, thickly sliced onions and paprika boost the flavor. You’ll have lots of sauce, so make mashed potatoes for soaking it up.

Halve the onions through the stem and cut the halves into ½-inch-thick half-moons. Set aside.

Season the chuck roast with the ¾ tsp. salt and the ½ tsp. pepper. Spread the flour on a plate. Coat the roast with the flour, shaking off the excess.

In a Dutch oven over medium-high heat, warm 2 Tbs. of the bacon fat. Add the roast and cook, turning occasionally, until browned on both sides, about 5 minutes total. Transfer to a plate.

Add the remaining 1 Tbs. bacon fat to the pot and heat over medium-high heat. Add the onions, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions soften, about 6 minutes. Stir in the garlic and paprika and cook until the garlic is fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in the stock, tomatoes and the 2 Tbs. parsley. Return the beef to the pot, nestling it in the onions. Bring the liquid to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover and simmer until the beef is fork-tender, about 2 hours.

Transfer the pot roast to a deep serving platter. Season the onion mixture with salt and pepper. Skim off any fat from the surface. Spoon the onion mixture around the roast and garnish with parsley. Serve immediately. Serves 4 to 6.

Variation: To make beef paprikash, simply add sour cream to the sauce: Transfer the pot roast to a platter and skim the fat from the sauce as directed. Stir 1 cup sour cream into the sauce and cook just until it is heated through; do not allow it to boil. Season with salt and pepper. Pot roast also makes excellent hot sandwiches. Slice the roast and serve it along with plenty of the saucy onions on crusty rolls.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Comfort Food*, by Rick Rodgers (Oxmoor House, 2009).

Stout-Braised Short Ribs

These hearty beef short ribs are slow-cooked in stout, a dark beer that originated in the British Isles. It is made with dark-roasted barley, which lends a rich, deep color and bittersweet flavor to the beer. Accompany the short ribs with a traditional Irish potato dish known as colcannon or simple mashed potatoes.

Season the short ribs generously on all sides with salt and pepper. In a large fry pan over medium-high heat, warm the oil until almost smoking. Working in batches (do not overcrowd), brown the ribs on all sides, 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate.

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Ingredients for Mom’s Home-Style Pot Roast

3 yellow onions

1 beef chuck roast, about 2½ lb.

¾ tsp. kosher salt, plus more, to taste

½ tsp. freshly ground pepper, plus more, to taste

¼ cup all-purpose flour

3 Tbs. rendered bacon fat or canola oil

4 garlic cloves, chopped

1 tsp. sweet paprika, preferably Hungarian or Spanish

1½ cups beef stock or broth

1½ cups canned plum tomatoes, drained and chopped

2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley, plus more for garnish

Ingredients for Stout-Braised Short Ribs

4 lb. beef short ribs

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

3 Tbs. canola oil

2 yellow onions, diced

3 carrots, peeled and diced

2 celery stalks, diced

6 garlic cloves, sliced

2 cups stout

8 fresh flat-leaf parsley sprigs (optional)

Ingredients for Garlicky Pork with Greens

2½ lb. boneless pork shoulder, trimmed of most fat and cut into 1½-inch chunks

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 Tbs. olive oil

1 large yellow onion, finely chopped

2 fresh thyme sprigs

15 to 20 garlic cloves

1 tsp. minced fresh rosemary (optional)

⅔ cup dry red wine

1 Tbs. red wine vinegar

⅔ cup beef or chicken stock

About 1¼ lb. kale, tough stems removed and leaves cut crosswise into wide strips

White bean salad for serving (optional)