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Opening Extract from...

Kitchenella

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PLATE 15: *Slightly Degreased Beef* recipe on page 117

Eighty degrees beef

see PLATE 15

A braise for beginners, and an enlightening experiment for experienced slow cooks, too. The Cretan mother turns stew (or stifado) cooking on its head. The typical order for adding the basic ingredients to the pot is: oil, onions, meat, water (or stock). In this recipe the first ingredient is water, then meat, and finally onions and oil. The Cretan mothers and their sons and daughters value the goodness in olive oil highly. Adding it after the slow cooking is done preserves the nutrients. The total cooking time is between 6 and 7 hours at approximately 80°C/175°F. You can adapt this dish to lamb, hare and rabbit. The meat literally melts into a juicy mass – there will not be much liquid. It is lovely eaten with buttered egg noodles or roasted or sautéed potatoes. Below the recipe is a list of ingredients to add during or after cooking. This is a perfect recipe for a slow cooker but the dish must be finished in a pan over a higher heat.

SERVES 4

- 1 kg/2lb 4oz shin of beef (or other braising cut like blade or neck),
cut into large 4cm/1½in cubes
- 1cm/½in cinnamon stick
- 8 juniper berries
- 3 bay leaves
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 small onions or shallots, peeled and left whole, or 2 onions, finely
chopped
- 1 wineglass red or white wine
- salt and black pepper

Slow

Trim any excess amount of fat or gristle from the beef. Place a heavy-based casserole or cast-iron pot over the heat and fill with water to a depth of about 5cm/2in. Heat the water to boiling point. If possible, tie up the spices in a piece of muslin and drop into the water. Otherwise add them loose, but remember that you must later pick them out of the braise, once the meat is tender. Add the meat to the pan and allow the water to come to the boil. The meat will immediately shrink and harden on contact with the hot water. Skim off any foam or impurities that rise to the surface. This is very important as it ensures the juices are clean and clear and will improve the end result.

Set the pan over a very low heat, minimum 75°C/165°F or no more than 85°C/185°F. You do not need a thermometer. Watch the liquid; it should just swirl slightly, and there should be no visible bubbles. Leave to cook like this, partially covered by a lid, for approximately 6 hours or until the meat is very tender. Lift out the meat with a slotted spoon and place on a plate. Pick out the spices or spice bag from the liquid and discard. Pour the liquid into a separate bowl and set to one side (there will only be a small amount left).

Turn up the heat and add the oil with the onions. Cook until they are lightly brown, then add the beef. Do not let the oil reach smoking point, because it destroys the nutrients and – just as essentially – the flavour. Brown the beef lightly in the oil. Add the wine and allow to come to the boil, then add the remaining cooking liquid. Simmer with the oil and other juices in the pan just for a few minutes. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper, then serve.



Kitchen note

You can add a number of different ingredients to the stew at the end.

- * Pitted Kalamata olives and fresh marjoram – add with the onions and 1 teaspoon tomato purée.
- * Pickled walnuts, with 1 tablespoon of their pickling juice – slice and add at very end.
- * Sliced aubergines and fresh thyme sprigs – sweat the aubergines first with salt, rinse and pat dry. Then add the aubergines and thyme with the onions and 1 tablespoon tomato purée and cook until soft.
- * Black grapes – add at the very end.
- * Golden sultanas or Muscat raisins and rosemary – add with the onions.
- * Butter beans and herbs – add after the beef has been browned.
- * Alternative meats: use cubed lamb shoulder, jointed rabbit, jointed hare or cubed venison.
- * Alternative cooking liquid: substitute the water and wine with either beer (ale), dry cider (good with rabbit) or meat stock.



Slow

The mothers of slow

Early memories of slowly braised meat began with page 546 of *The Constance Spry Cookery Book* and the oxtail stew my mother would often cook for Saturday lunch. Spry's essential secret lay in blanching the meat in boiling water first, resulting in a stew that had reassuring, clear juices which would seep into the buttery contents of the baked potatoes on our plates.

From there I turned to Jane Grigson, whose meat chapter in *English Food* taught me the most about the lost traditions of braising; how

the liquid in the pot should barely move – only ‘burp,’ as she delightfully put it. Grigson was unafraid to admit that slow meant really slow. ‘Leave the whole thing in a cool place for four days,’ she said drily, in one of her recipes for mutton. Now that is what I call an unfashionable truth, news that the ‘quick and easy’ brigade must take sitting down. She also wrote about the lost breeds and styles of traditional livestock farming, and how important these elements are if you want great results.

I made my first bollito misto (mixed boiled meats) following a recipe for a cheaper version of the festive dish in Elizabeth David’s *Italian Food*. The outcome, with very little work but a substantial amount of simmering, was unutterably glamorous: a tender piece of gammon, rolled brisket and a whole chicken, served with the dark blond cooking broth and a dazzling green herb and caper sauce. But I was equally passionate about a recipe for a humble hand of pork braised with water, herbs and garlic, and much later on with Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers’ easy recipe for pork cooked in milk with lemon and sage. Many encounters with slow pots in the kitchens of friends and family remain the best in my memory. A huge bowl of game and pork rillettes made by a friend, Charlotte Moore, in her Buckinghamshire farmhouse kitchen; Julia Moore, another talented, natural cook (but no relation), made an unforgettable pot of poached chicken with ten thousand fathoms of flavour. This is beginning to sound like a claim that men never braise, but they do. They were taught to by their women, of course!