

What: Braising

Definition: to cook [meat] by frying it in fat and then simmering in liquid inside a sealed container for an extended period of time

Why: Braising is a way to utilize meat that would otherwise be extremely tough and incredibly chewy. Braising typically employs meat that comes from a heavily used muscle, for example the leg (like a shank) or shoulder. Well-exercised muscles, which often times come from the front or back of an animal, work well in braising because

1. These muscles have additional connective tissues and collagen; when broken down these connective tissues turn into a gelatin, which offers a rich, smooth, and full mouth feel
2. Muscles that work hard develop more flavor. 'Nuff said.

In Sum: By cooking tough meat for a long time over a low temperature, we give the connective tissues, muscle fibers, and collagen in the meat enough time to break down and tenderize.

Where: In a Crockpot, or a Dutch Oven set to a low temperature

How:

1. Bring meat to room temperature

Before cooking, allow meat to sit on the counter for about 30 minutes. Bringing it to room temperature will allow for even cooking.

2. Season meat liberally with salt and pepper

One of the biggest mistakes that home cooks make is holding back on seasoning. Try to cover the entire surface of the meat with seasoning; the texture of the fresh-cracked salt and pepper will create an incredibly crispy and flavorful crust.

3. Sear meat first

Using lard (available for sale at PRB!), bacon fat (available for sale at PRB!), or grape seed oil, sear seasoned meat over high heat until browned on all sides. This searing evokes the Maillard Reaction, which is the reaction between amino acids and sugar that

creates that desirable *browned* or *charred* flavor that we associate with searing, roasting, and grilling. Browning the meat adds unprecedented *umami* flavor!

4. Pick vegetables and herbs that pair well with your meat

Lamb and fennel are a killer combination; beef goes great with onions and carrots; pork tastes great with sweeter items like apple or tomato. If you want more brightness to your dish, use herbs with brighter flavors; for heartier wintery dishes, employ herbs with rich, deep flavor. Citrus peel or zest will bring additional life.

5. Sear vegetables in the meat drippings

Once you've seared off your meat and engages that delicious, crusty Maillard Reaction, remove the meat from your pan and add the vegetables to the leftover fat and meat drippings. Introduce them to Maillard, too!

6. Deglaze with wine

For brightness, use something like a sauvignon blanc or temperanillo. For a deeper more robust flavor, try a bolder red wine, like a cabernet.

7. Use vinegar for brightness and acidity

Use vinegar that pairs well with your wine. Ex: use red wine vinegar when deglazing with merlot.

8. Combine all ingredients in Crockpot or Dutch oven

9. Add cooking liquid

Animal stock is a no-brainer for braising meat, but apple cider or beer can add lots of flavor, and even water can be employed when you're in a pinch. You want the cooking liquid to at least come halfway up the meat. For a juicier piece of meat with more sauce, completely submerge the meat.

10. Slow and Low

Set your Crockpot or oven to a temperature to suit your time. If you have all day, slow and low is the way to go: try 200° F for 6 hours. On the other hand, if you're in more of a time pinch 300° for 3 hours will do, but it won't be quite as juicy. You can even go as low as 135° and let it cook for 24 hours!

You'll know the meat is done if it's tender and pull apart-able, but still has a nice chewy texture—you don't want mush. Check the meat halfway through its cooking time; this will also allow you to check the liquid level and add more if necessary.

11. Final touches

Depending on how you chose to cut the vegetables, and depending on how they look after spending an extended period of time in the heat, you could opt to keep them in your sauce or you could strain them out; you could add a thickening agent like cheese to make your sauce tighter, or you could simmer the sauce and allow it to reduce.

Just before you serve, add your fresh herbs, peas, and whatever other greenery you so choose to keep the color bright.

Serve braised meat solo, or over pasta, potatoes, rice, polenta...the pantry is your oyster!