

Cooking Corner: Braising expectations

by Lori Weisberg

Nothing says comfort on a wintry night like a cozy fire, a steaming mug of herbal tea and a pot of short ribs, bathed in red wine, simmering away in the oven.

TIME SAVOR - For boeuf bourguignon, Pascal Vignau, owner/chef of Savory in Encinitas, Calif., simmers beef in wine before braising the mixture in the oven. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras.

SIGNATURE DISH - Slow-cooked boeuf bourguignon is a signature dish at Savory, French-born chef Pascal Vignau's restaurant. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. Truthfully, you don't need cold temperatures as an excuse to break out your favorite braising dish, because slow-cooked meats are sure to please whether it's chilly or balmy outside.

Braised dishes, though, are associated with the winter months because they tend to be heartier, more rustic meals that confer a sense of warmth and instant comfort.

The notion of slow-cooking, which is what braising is all about, might seem out of vogue in this era of 30-minute meals and pre-made convenience food, but the supple, buttery texture and rich, bold flavors of a braised dish make it well worth the hours needed to execute it.

Think brisket, pot roast, osso buco, coq au vin - all classic braised dishes.

"With braised food, there is something old-fashioned and soul-satisfying, both in the cooking process and when you come into a house and smell the braising meat," says Los Angeles restaurant owner and chef Suzanne Goin, whose cookbook, "Sunday Suppers at Lucques" (Knopf, \$35), has a number of can't-miss recipes for braised dishes.

"It speaks to something inside, like something from your childhood, like sugar cookies, and it makes you feel

cared for and warm."

In fact, so popular are the braised beef short ribs at Goin's restaurant, Lucques, that she finally bowed to pressure from customers to include them on the menu year-round, even in "90-degree weather."

"There was a customer rebellion when I tried to take them off," she admits.

French-born chef Pascal Vignau, owner of Savory restaurant in Encinitas, Calif., worries that braises and stews will eventually fall out of favor in American households amid the mad dash to squeeze home-cooked meals into today's fast-paced lifestyles.

"In Chicago and New York, they do a lot more braising because of the weather," says the burly Vignau, whose favorite braised dish is boeuf bourguignon. "We're too preoccupied with the waves and the flip-flops.

"These days, they say this is cooking that Grandma used to do, but young people don't want to spend too much time cooking, so that proves they haven't really learned from their mom."

Watching Vignau prepare his signature boeuf bourguignon, you can quickly appreciate the intoxicating appeal of a braised dish. Two days of marinating large chunks of trimmed beef cheeks in burgundy wine has tinted the meat a deep shade of purple.

Vignau coarsely chops carrots, celery and onion, cracks open a head of garlic and tosses it all in a bowl with the beef, sprigs of thyme and a couple bottles of wine, demonstrating how to make the marinade.

He quickly sears the marinated beef cheeks, sautes the vegetables and begins cooking the mixture on his six-burner stove top before depositing his copper stew pot in a 375 F oven. Within minutes, the bubbling brew has released an irresistible aroma of caramelized beef and earthy burgundy.

While the ingredients are simple, the cooking technique transforms them into a dish of multilayered tastes.

Simply put, braising is cooking meat in a relatively small amount of liquid - wine, stock or beer, for example - in a covered pot or pan for a long time, often several hours. The addition of aromatic herbs and root vegetables, such as leeks, onions, carrots and garlic, enhances the flavor and makes for a nearly ready-made sauce.

Once the beef - or chicken - is finished cooking, the sauce is strained and then reduced to concentrate its full-bodied flavor. But long before that, there is a crucial step that will ensure a more flavorful end product.

After you season the meat and, if you like, dredge it in flour, sear it for a few minutes over high heat on the stove top until it is nicely browned. Then saute vegetables in the same pan to produce a caramelization that will eventually be incorporated into the sauce, once wine and broth are added to loosen those crusty browned bits at the bottom of the pan.

No special equipment is necessary other than a heavy-lidded pot or pan, preferably cast iron, or a Dutch oven.

Braising typically relies on tougher, more muscled, sinewy cuts of beef or pork, which must be cooked for a long time to develop that fork-tender texture. They also tend to be the less expensive cuts of meat. Braised dishes were once known as peasant food because the meat was affordable to the poor.

"You definitely want a meat with excellent marbling," says Katherine Emmenegger, an instructor at Great News! Cooking School in San Diego, where she teaches a class on braising. "The moist-heat environment is required to break down the collagen of the meat, and it becomes more tender.

"You wouldn't do that with tenderloin of beef because it's already tender. It would just get dried out, whereas the other meats get better with the cooking."

One of the big pluses of braised dishes is that they actually taste better the day after cooking, making them ideal for entertaining. And made in large quantities, they can be versatile leftovers.

"While it takes time in the oven, there's really not that much prep time," Goin points out. "It seems like such an easy way to cook, and if you're making short ribs, I'd make 12, and the first night it's short ribs, and the next night shred them with pasta, black olives and feta, and the next day you could have short rib sandwiches.

"Once you go thorough the process, you can make a lot of different things."

SAVORY'S BOEUF BOURGUIGNON

8 pounds well-trimmed beef cheeks (see note) or boneless beef short ribs

1 pound peeled carrots, coarsely chopped

3 celery ribs, coarsely chopped

1 large onion, coarsely chopped

1 tablespoon cracked black pepper

3 bay leaves

2 sprigs thyme

1 garlic head, cut in half horizontally

1/2 cup red wine vinegar

1.5 liters red wine

Salt and pepper, to taste

1/2 cup flour

1/2 cup cooking oil

2 tablespoons tomato paste

Yields 8 to 10 servings.

To make marinade: Cut beef cheeks into 16 to 20 pieces and remove all fatty parts but leave silver skin. Place beef in large bowl with carrots, celery, onion, pepper, bay leaves, thyme, garlic, vinegar and red wine. Mix well and cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for at least 2 days.

When you're ready to cook, remove meat and vegetables from marinade and let drain thoroughly, reserving marinade. Season meat to taste with salt and pepper and lightly dredge in flour.

Pour 1/2 the oil into large saute pan or cast-iron skillet, heat over medium heat, and sear meat on all sides for about 10 to 15 minutes. Remove meat to stew pot and add vegetables to saute pan, turning and browning them. Add more oil if necessary.

When all vegetables are well browned, add tomato paste and mix well. Add the vegetable mixture to meat and stir over medium heat. Then add reserved marinade and bring to a boil, making sure to skim top often.

Cover pot and place in oven preheated to 375 F. Cook for 2 1/2 to 3 hours. Remove from oven and remove meat from liquid. Meat should be very tender. Strain sauce and discard vegetables. Place cooking liquid back on stove and cook until reduced to a syrupy consistency, about 10 minutes. Adjust seasoning if necessary and pour over meat.

Serve over pasta or with roasted potatoes and root vegetables.

Note: Beef cheeks can be special-ordered from Iowa Meat Farms (iowameatfarms.com).

- Chef Pascal Vignau, Savory, Encinitas, Calif.)

MEDITERRANEAN-STYLE BRAISED PORK

3 1/2 pounds pork shoulder roast, rinsed and patted dry

Salt and pepper, to taste

1 cup all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons grapeseed oil

4 garlic cloves, peeled and minced

3 pounds large yellow onions, peeled and sliced 1/4 inch thick

3 pounds Roma tomatoes, washed, cored and quartered

1 cup low-sodium vegetable broth or chicken broth

1 cup dry white wine

2 sprigs rosemary

Yields 6 servings.

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Season pork to taste with salt and pepper. Dredge in flour to coat.

In large Dutch oven over medium-high heat, heat oil. Sear pork on all sides to golden brown. Transfer pork to platter.

Add a bit more oil to the pot. Saute garlic and onions until lightly softened, about 5 minutes.

Return pork to pot and cover with some of the onions. Top with tomatoes, vegetable broth, wine and rosemary. Cover pot and place in oven for about 2 hours, until meat is tender.

Remove from oven, transfer pork to platter and let stand 15 minutes. Slice and serve with tomatoes, onions and juice.

Note: This can also be made on the stove top over medium heat or in a slow cooker.

- Katherine Emmenegger.

BRAISED BEEF SHORT RIBS WITH SWISS CHARD

6 beef short ribs (14 to 16 ounces each)

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves

1 tablespoon freshly cracked black pepper

3 dozen small pearl onions

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Coarse salt

1 cup diced onion

1/3 cup diced carrot

1/3 cup diced celery

4 sprigs fresh thyme

2 bay leaves

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

1 1/2 cups port

2 1/2 cups hearty red wine

6 cups beef or veal stock

4 sprigs flat-leaf parsley

2 bunches Swiss chard, stemmed, leaves torn into large pieces

Yields 6 servings.

Season short ribs with 1 tablespoon of thyme and 1 tablespoon pepper. Use your hands to coat meat well. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Take short ribs out of refrigerator 1 hour before cooking. After 30 minutes, season them generously on all sides with salt.

Preheat oven to 425 F. Toss pearl onions with 2 tablespoons of oil, 1 teaspoon thyme, 3/4 teaspoon salt and pinch of pepper. Spread onions on rimmed baking sheet and roast for 15 minutes, or until tender. When onions have cooled, slip off skins with fingers and set onions aside. Turn oven down to 325 F.

In large skillet, heat 3 tablespoons of oil over high heat until it is almost smoking. Sear the short ribs, meaty sides down, working in batches to avoid crowding, until they are browned on their meaty sides. Do not rush this step; it will take at least 15 minutes. When ribs are nicely browned, transfer to roasting pan large enough to hold ribs standing up in 1 layer.

Turn heat down to medium and add onion, carrot, celery, thyme sprigs and bay leaves to skillet. Cook, stirring to scrape crusty bits in pan, for 6 to 8 minutes, or until vegetables begin to caramelize. Add vinegar, port and wine. Turn heat to high, and let liquid bubble steadily until reduced by 1/2.

Add stock and return the mixture to a boil. Pour liquid over short ribs; it should almost cover them. Tuck parsley sprigs around meat. Cover tightly with foil.

Braise for about 3 hours, or until meat offers no resistance when pierced with paring knife. Let ribs rest for

10 minutes in their juices, then transfer them to rimmed baking sheet.

Turn up oven temperature to 400 F. Roast ribs for 10 to 15 minutes, or until browned.

Strain broth into saucepan, pressing down on vegetables to extract all juices. Skim off and discard fat. If broth seems thin, reduce it over medium-high heat to thicken slightly. Taste for seasoning.

Heat large saute pan over high heat for 2 minutes. Add 3 tablespoons olive oil to pan, and stir in cooked pearl onions. Add 1/2 Swiss chard and cook 1 to 2 minutes, stirring until wilted. Add a splash of water and remaining Swiss chard. Season with a heaping 1/4 teaspoon of salt and a pinch of ground black pepper. Cook a few more minutes, stirring frequently, until greens are tender.

Place Swiss chard on large, warm platter and arrange short ribs on top. Spoon lots of braising juices over ribs.

- "Sunday Suppers at Lucques" by Suzanne Goin (Knopf, \$35).

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