

Sundays in the Kitchen with Bruce and Mark: Braised Beef

Braise a batch of beef now, and use it in hearty meals all week long.

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**Sunday
in the
Kitchen**
with Mark & Bruce

A true braise is a thing of beauty: long-cooked, slow, steady, not much effort, just about perfect for a Sunday afternoon.

Too bad a true braise is something of a rarity. Too often, braises get conflated with stews — and even soups. A braise doesn't necessarily need a bowl. In fact, this classic version gives you tender meat and a small amount of sauce. Break out the baked potatoes!

In truth, a braise is a low-liquid, fairly low-heat cooking method, preferably in a covered pot in the oven, where the radiant, ambient heat works on all sides of the meat and/or vegetables, rather than from the “bottom up” as on the top of a stove.

It's that “low liquid” part of the technique that's so easy to forget. A true braise doesn't souse meat or vegetables with broth or wine. Listen, we're all for stews — and soups, too. But a braise is something slightly more complex, more sophisticated. Old-fashioned, too. A proper braise has just enough liquid in the pot to create a moist environment, the better to tenderize meat or vegetables slowly, their natural sugars caramelizing to perfection without getting watery or too soft.

The only real work for a good braise is in the browning. This is where you're adding most of the meaty flavor. Plan on working a good 30 minutes to brown this much beef. And pat the cubes of beef dry before they go into

the pot. The excess moisture can get in the way of proper browning. You want a good caramelization on each and every piece to add the most flavor to the braising liquid.

Once you do that, you're really almost through. The oven does the rest. And a good braising technique works best with less expensive, more economical cuts, like the beef round in our classic braise this month. Without lots of extra fat, the meat has a chance to "relax" in the heat, its fibers loosening to release those natural juices. There'll also be far less shrinkage than with fattier cuts, so you'll end up with tender chunks on the plate, a real treat for a winter evening.

Along the way, the onions melt into the sauce, slowly flavoring it with their aromatic edge. We've also added some dried figs for a hint of earthy sweetness. It's a nice balance with the beef.

Not sold yet? Well, here's the best news of all. A slow braise leaves plenty of time to catch up on the Sunday papers in the afternoon. Or maybe finish that novel that's been on your night table for a month. Or call those cousins you haven't spoken to in a while. When they ask what you're doing, say you're braising beef. They'll be so impressed. Just don't tell them that when you hang up, you're not getting up from the chair but going back to the newspaper for another hour!

Braised Beef

Makes 16 servings

POINTSPLUS[®] value | 4 per serving

Ingredients

- Cooking spray
- 4 lbs beef round, lean only, cut into 48 (1 1/2-inch) cubes
- 2 large yellow onions, chopped
- 2 dried figs, minced
- 4 medium garlic cloves, minced
- 2 Tbsp stemmed fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 tsp ground allspice
- 4 bay leaves
- 4 cups (1 quart) reduced-sodium beef broth

Instructions

1. Position rack in lower third of oven, so that a large, covered Dutch oven can fit with several inches of headspace to spare. Heat oven to 325°F.

2. Spray a large Dutch oven with cooking spray; set over medium heat for 2 minutes. Brown meat in batches without crowding the pot, turning pieces to make sure they get well browned on each side, about 6 minutes per batch. Transfer pieces to a bowl, spray Dutch oven with additional nonstick spray between batches if you notice too much sticking; continue browning additional batches and transferring meat to bowl.
3. Add onions to pot; cook, stirring often, until softened and slightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add figs, garlic, thyme, salt, pepper, allspice and bay leaves. Stir over heat for 1 minute, then pour in broth. Bring to a simmer, scraping up any browned bits on pot's bottom.
4. Return meat and any accumulated juice to pot. Bring to a full simmer, cover and set in oven. Braise until meat is fork-tender, about 2 1/2 hours. Cool 10 minutes before serving. Store, covered, in refrigerator for up to 4 days.

Serving size: 3 cubes of meat with 3 tablespoons sauce

Sunday-night dinner

Roast some Brussels sprouts and carrots while the beef braises. For each serving, use 1 large carrot, cut into 1-inch pieces, and 6 small Brussels sprouts, stems trimmed and any yellow leaves discarded. Mix vegetables in a roasting pan, give them a generous grind of black pepper, spray them with nonstick spray, and roast in a preheated 325°F oven for 1 hour, tossing occasionally, until tender but still crisp. Serve these with the braised beef.

Tips, hints and suggestions

1. For an effective braise, check your cookware. Lids and pots go out of alignment over time, especially after banging around in a cupboard for years. Unfortunately, loose-fitting lids can mean you lose more liquid from a bubbling braise. And every drop is flavor! Have a little extra broth on hand in case the pot becomes too dry. And then consider budgeting for newer, better cookware.
2. The beef cubes can stick when they first hit the pot's hot surface. Be patient to get a good caramelized crust that will then release off the surface with few problems.
3. One-inch pieces of carrot? That's something of a recipe conundrum since the vegetable has thicker and thinner ends. For even roasting, figure on 1-inch pieces at the thick end — then cut the carrot into slightly larger and larger bits as you move up the vegetable.
4. If the Brussels sprouts are large, more than 2 inches in diameter, make an "x" in the stem end of each for more even cooking. If they're golf-ball-size, cut them in half.