

In the first week of March, I cooked enough beef stew and sourdough cornbread to feed 19 people supper. The stew recipe came from three sources. *Cook's Illustrated* and *Gourmet* magazines supported my own departures and additions from cooking big pots of stews for my family.

Before going into cooking the tripled recipe, if dietary restrictions or fasting laws forbid cooking with wine, look for another source to learn to cook stew. The flavor of a Burgundy congealed on a chunk of beef after three hours of slow cooking brings forth an essence impossible to match by any spice, dry or liquid. But you don't have to be snooty. The winery at Fort Stockton bottles an excellent Merlot for cooking beef.

Cheap wine does become worse in cooking. The same is true of beef. Shoulder is the most flavorful cut. Avoid even looking at packages labeled "stew meat," as chancing meat market stew meat is like buying a car in a junkyard. One guideline offered is to buy the best wine and beef you can afford.

Be forewarned that supermarket wines presented as "cooking wine" are laden with salt and are degenerate members of the wine family. Also, one California winery makes such a deplorable concoction, it is dangerous for cooking or drinking. Once in New Jersey on a catered picnic, a hardy young male black fly slipped off the rim of my companion's glass and plunged to his death from the fumes off a California wine claimed to be from a red grape. His wings folded against his body in the throes of rigor mortis before he fell to his liquid grave. A waiter asked to freshen her glass, unwittingly committing an aphorism of gigantic proportions. Studying the fly sinking slowly to the cone of the glass, she replied, "No, a can of Pepsi with a tiny hole in the top is fine."

But back to the big order of stew last month ... First, I removed the rind from a pound of salt pork to blanch the rind and sauté the pork slices in a roaster pan. After removing the salt pork and most of the fat, proceeded to brown 12 pounds of lean chuck cut in one and one-half inch cubes in small batches. I chew on a hackberry twig to keep from hyperventilating during the trauma of popping grease

and the roar of the exhaust fan. Prayer beads or meditation exercises are other considerations.

As the beef sears, chop enough onion to make four and one half cups. Peel 12 garlic cloves and crush with a hammer or a bacon press. Drain the pork rind. By juggling the spatula to the left hand, the right one can be salting and peppering the cooked meat in a big mixing bowl, cutting off the cell phone, looking for longer-handled tongs, and wiping splattering grease off the recipe book.

Once the meat and onions are browned, add to the roaster along with the juices from the bowl. Now comes six cups of red wine, three cups of chicken broth, 24 ounces of canned organic tomatoes, one and one-half cup of red vinegar made from 80 percent white vinegar and 20 percent cheap red wine. Catch your breath, then add seven tablespoons of brown sugar, four and one-half teaspoons of cumin, and three cinnamon sticks.

The French name of the next step does not apply in the shortgrass kitchen. Forget the name and cut 40 inches from a roll of cheesecloth to double over and lie flat on a bread board. In the center of the cloth, place the pork rind, the

crushed garlic, pieces of fried salt pork, three bay leaves, and six sprigs of fresh thyme if you have fresh herbs. Tie that booger into a sack. Later, if you are asked if you can make a *bouquet garni*, tell 'em, "No, but my ol' granny used to have a pouch called a *sachet* she kept to make her hankies smell good." After the stew is done, press the juices from the bundle and discard.

As the stew cooks at 250 degrees, peel carrots and small onions to be steamed and then added at the very end of the procedure. If good vegetables are more important than a good stew, add the carrots and onions one hour before the dish is done.

If you add potatoes to the stew at any time, return to step one, braise the beef in olive oil and roast in a 250-degree oven. Serve the wine as an aperitif; throw in all the potatoes you wish. Use a strong mouthwash to kill the after-effects of eating soggy potatoes.

My notes say butter or oil can be used instead of salt pork. The blanched rind, however, is important. Good stew cannot be made without chicken broth to bring forth the flavor of the meat. Flour is for baking bread. Dry aging

beef for five days in the refrigerator wrapped in paper towels improves the flavor and tenderizes the meat.

The best way to assure success is to have hungry guests and cold weather. About the worst thing you can do is to forget what I said about adding potatoes.