

## Making Sacrifice Stew

Here is the prototype for a lovely stew that starts with an inexpensive but good roast. I suggest a beef chuck roast or a pork butt or shoulder roast (same thing different name). Both those cuts come from the shoulder of the animal and have a combination of fat and cartilage in the meat along with good flavor that make them perfect for slow cooking.



If buying retail, wait until they are on sale and stock up. Cutting these roasts into chunks yourself is both economical and wise, particularly if you want to know where, on the animal, your stew meat is coming from. Lots of miscellaneous trim is used for the pre-cut stew you see in your butcher's case. And do stick with chuck or shoulder roasts. An inexpensive lean meat like a bottom round roast is great if you want to slice it very thin for stir fry or for soups like Pho (the meat is added at the very end and cooks very quickly by the heat of the broth alone) but those are not qualities you want for a long simmering stew.

Like the Frugal Soup, you won't need much meat for this because this is not a meaty stew but a stew with some meaty flavors. One pound of meat for a family of four would be enough. Double that for more people as I did in this recipe. Prudence and your pocketbook should be the guide.

### A Prototype Stew Recipe:

After trimming the meat (removing big pieces of fat) cut it into chunks and season them with salt and pepper. Personally, I like my meat to be cold when I cut it and room temperature when it cook it because it cooks more evenly that way. This is particularly true of steaks and whole roasts but that takes a little forethought.

Heat a pan (see note) over medium heat. Add enough oil to cover the bottom by about a quarter inch. When hot (about two minutes), add the meat.

The meat chunks should be spaced out to encourage browning. Set too close and they may steam. Allow them to brown for one or two minutes on each side before turning. If, when attempting to turn the chunks, they stick a bit, wait another minute. They will release easily after the proper browning has occurred.



Over two pounds for just \$6.40.



Trim big pieces of fat.



After the chunks are browned on all sides remove them to pan. I have shown you some options but I will be using the big roasting pan.



Drain off excess oil if needed. You only want about 2 tablespoons left in the pan to saute the onions in. Don't worry about the browned bits left in the pan, you will turn them into something great in a minute.



Now add one, two or three sliced onions and saute them. You can slice them thin or thick or in chunks I like them thin. You can never have too many. They add a lovely flavor to soups or stews. Buy onions when you see them on sale. Stock up on them. Keep them dry and cool.

They are serious power players in the kitchen.

Cook the onions with medium heat until they are "translucent" which just means they have changed from white to a sort of beige glistening color, It will take about five minutes. Now you can add two to three stalks of chopped celery and three or so minced garlic cloves. Let that saute a minute. If you have it, add two tablespoons of tomato paste. Buy tomato paste in a tube because it keeps well that way. You will come to love tomato paste because it adds substance to your sauces, soups and stews. Add some dry herbs now- oregano, rosemary, thyme? Be adventurous. Let those flavors mingle by cooking another minute or two. Stir as it cooks.

Now add a cup of water, wine or broth to this pan so you pull some of the scraping from the pan. Scrape the pan with a wooden spatula so the scrapings are added to the sauce that is forming. If using wine let it cook down by half. Don't worry if it looks like a holy mess now. It will taste good in the end.

Throw this mess in with the meat and add the vegetables. I suggest adding chopped carrots, potatoes, parsnips, rutabaga or whatever root vegetables you would like. Winter squashes are also nice. I'd go heavy here because this will be the filler of your meal. I suggest at least three to four times as much vegetables as meat but you be the judge. Avoid vegetables that cook quickly (green leafy or broccoli for example) since this stew will be cooking for a while.



*Wide Pan for stove top cooking.*



*Tall pot.*



*My Choice.*



Give the entire pot a stir so that all the flavors mingle. Now add water or broth to go up 1/4 to 1/2 the height of the vegetable and meat mixture. The smaller amount will be used for slower, longer cooking since extra moisture from vegetables and meat will be released from really slow cooking. Knowing how much liquid you added will be easiest to see in a roaster.

Depending on how much you are cooking, I would add anywhere from a teaspoon to a tablespoon of salt and some pepper. Start with less. You can always add more at the end of cooking. You can throw in a bay leaf and a dried whole chili pepper too. Do not be afraid. You will not mess it up.

Bring this mixture to a boil and immediately reduce the temperature to a slow simmer. Cover tightly. Sometimes I create a foil seal (save foil) before topping it with the lid.



Your stew can cook on top of the stove or in a pre-heated 350 degree oven. I like to cook my stews at an even lower temperature - 300 degrees. That's for longer, slower cooking; up to three hours. Really slow cooking will allow the vegetables to keep their structure. You can also cook it in a crock pot after browning the meat and onions. In all cases the principle behind slow stew cooking is to allow the tougher fibers and cartilage in the meat break down and become nice and tender along with the root vegetables. Depending on your choice of vegetables, the cuts of your meat, and the temperature you are using, your stew will be ready anywhere from one and half to three hours. With crock pots it may be longer.

After one and a half hours you can test the meat's tenderness. It should be nice and soft but will get softer. I would suggest at least two but if hunger dictates you eat quicker you can. It will just not be as good. And if you can make it ahead and let it sit for a day in the fridge before serving, ooh, la, la. Flavors will mingle and you will be happy. Very few slow stews or soups will not benefit from a day of rest. Letting it sit for a day or at least a few hours will also let the vegetables solidify a bit so they hold their form when serving. Stirring your stew too much when it is just out of the oven will create a breakdown of the vegetables. Even an hour's rest will be appreciated.

If too much liquid has developed in your stew and you want it to be thicker you can always put some of the liquid in another pot and thicken it with either cornstarch or flour. Doing that adds a certain bulk to the dish.

To thicken, put approximately two cups of the liquid into a separate pot and bring to a boil. In a separate dish mix together 4 tablespoons of cornstarch or flour with an equal amount of cold water to make a thin paste (adjust the ratio of liquid to flour or cornstarch if you are starting with less liquid). Once the liquid comes to the boil, turn off the heat and slowly whisk in this thin paste. When completely added, bring the temperature back to the boil while stirring constantly. Let it boil about a minute or two to cook the cornstarch or flour so it will not taste "raw". If the mixture gets

too thick, turn the heat off and whisk in more liquid. You just don't want to add a flour mixture to boiling liquid lest you want to make dumplings (which I will discuss in another piece because dumplings are great cheap food).

Return this thickened mass into the main stew. With a wooden spoon (or whatever utensil you have) distribute it through the rest of the stew. If you want you can also thicken the stew just by mashing up some of the potatoes in the pot or just serve the entire thing on top of some crusty bread. Serving it on crusty or day old (many day's old even) bread will only make it go further and it taste great. Using an old sourdough or ciabatta is perfect given their crunchy crusts. Really, old-timers did not through out stale bread. In another post I'll share how many great ways you can use old bread - even for thickening soups and stews.

Taste the stew and add salt and pepper if you want. Add other condiments as your taste dictates. I often add my home-made ketchup and some fish sauce which, in taste, is very similar to worcestershire sauce. When serving you can top it off with some fresh herbs or hot sauce or fresh minced onions. Many cultures add a little fresh flavor when serving a cooked soup or stew. It adds punch to the dish. If, however, your stew has sat overnight and the flavors have mingled you may not want to add anything at all. It will be lovely.

Take note of each step. Watch, observe, taste. Start experimenting with different meats (beef, lamb or pork) or different cuts (oxtails, short ribs and fresh hocks will work), different herbs and spices, vegetables and liquids. Though some folks marinate the meat for added flavor prior to browning (and the meat should be patted dry before browning it) it is not necessary. The purpose of marinades (from wine to yogurt) is to soften the fibers in meat and in long cooking stews you don't really need it.

Now enjoy. It will be good and it will not feel like a sacrifice to eat it at all.

This big pot of stew that will serve at least 6 hungry people cost about \$10.00.



*Note: Certain pans will create better browning environment for your meat. The best pan will be a cast iron pan but cast iron reacts to acid so if you are adding tomato paste or wine it might be better to go with enameled cast iron. You can find either of these pans at second-hand shops. Personally, I would stay away with anything with teflon or other no-stick surfaces. Using a wide pan or not overcrowding the meat will keep it from steaming as opposed to browning.*

