

Mastering the Art of Stew

A little know-how goes a long way toward avoiding common mistakes when making stews. Here's how to get it right every time. BY KEITH DRESSER

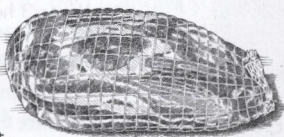
Stew is kitchen alchemy that turns a marginal cut of meat and some basic vegetables into something rich, flavorful, and much more interesting. Even better, stew generally requires little preparation or effort; time and gentle simmering do all the work. That said, we've all had (or made) stews with tough meat, listless vegetables, and dull, watery broth. Over the years, we've learned which steps produce a superior stew.

Choosing the Right Meat

Choosing the proper cut of meat is the single most important part of making a great stew. We like to use cuts from the shoulder area, because they have the best combination of flavor and texture. Meat from this region is well marbled with fat, which means it won't dry out during long, slow cooking. In chicken, the high percentage of intramuscular fat in thigh meat makes this part the preferred choice. For the best results, we like to cut our own stew meat (see "Cut Your Own Meat," page 17).

PORK

We like pork butt (also called Boston shoulder or Boston butt) for its great flavor, but the less-expensive and slightly fattier picnic shoulder is also a fine choice.



PORK BUTT

BEEF

We love the beefy taste and exceptional tenderness of chuck-eye roast. Another good option: the chuck 7-bone roast.



CHUCK EYE

LAMB

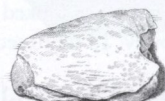
Roasts from the lamb shoulder can be hard to find, so we rely on shoulder-cut chops such as the round-bone for our stews. This chop has bold taste mellowed by long cooking, and its bones are a bonus that add extra flavor to the pot. An alternative choice is the blade chop.



ROUND-BONE CHOP

CHICKEN

The extra fat and connective tissue in thigh meat make it better suited than breast meat for stew; it also separates more easily from the bone than does drumstick meat. We use skin-on thighs to protect the meat and keep it from overcooking and drying out during browning. Both the bones and fat lend stronger chicken flavor.



BONE-IN CHICKEN THIGH

KEY EQUIPMENT

DUTCH OVEN

A Dutch oven is essential for making stew. Look for one that is twice as wide as it is high, with a minimum capacity of 6 quarts (7 or 8 is even better). The bottom should be thick, so food browns evenly and the pot retains heat during cooking. The pot should also have a tight-fitting lid to prevent excess evaporation.

TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ LE CREUSET

7¼-Quart
Round French
Oven, \$229.95

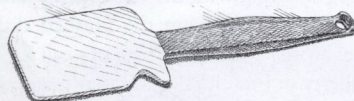


BEST BUY:

➤ TRAMONTINA 6.5 Quart Cast Iron Dutch Oven, \$39.86

HEATPROOF SPATULA

Wooden spoons are things of the past. Our favorite spatula is rigid enough to stir a thick stew yet flexible enough to get into the tight corners of a pot when deglazing. Throw in the fact that its surface won't stain, and what's not to like?

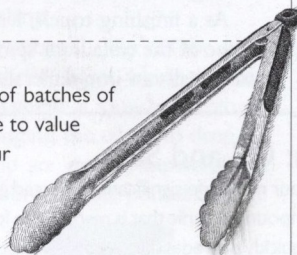


TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ RUBBERMAID 13.5-Inch High Heat Scraper, \$11.40

TONGS

After flipping thousands of batches of cubed meat, we've come to value a good pair of tongs. Our favorite handily picks up the smallest pieces of meat without tearing or mashing.

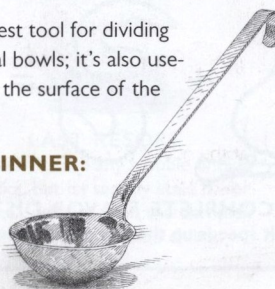


TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ OXO Good Grips 12-Inch Locking Tongs, \$10.39

LADLE

A ladle is definitely the best tool for dividing portions among individual bowls; it's also useful for skimming fat from the surface of the stew before serving.



TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ RÖSLE Ladle with Pouring Rim & Hook Handle, \$26.95

KEY FLAVOR ENHANCERS

BROTH

While broth is not as central to the flavor of stew as it is to soup, choosing a high-quality brand is still important. And using a low-sodium broth is essential; as the liquid in a stew reduces, regular full-sodium broth can turn the stew too salty and ruin the flavor.



TEST KITCHEN WINNERS:

➤ SWANSON Certified Organic Free Range Chicken Broth and PACIFIC Beef Broth



WINE

When a stew calls for wine, many cooks will grab the least-expensive bottle on hand. But even in small amounts, there is no hiding the taste of bad wine. In the test kitchen, we prefer the fuller, more complex flavor of wine made with more than one grape variety.

TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ CÔTES DU RHÔNE or other fruity wine with little or no oak



BEER

In general, we prefer darker ales to lighter lagers for the rich, full flavor they impart to stew (lager can leave stews tasting watery). As long as they're dark, nonalcoholic ales will work equally well.

TEST KITCHEN WINNERS:

➤ Amber and dark-colored ales



TOMATO PASTE

A small amount of tomato paste added to a stew along with the aromatics brings depth and color, and its slight acidity enhances the flavor of other ingredients.



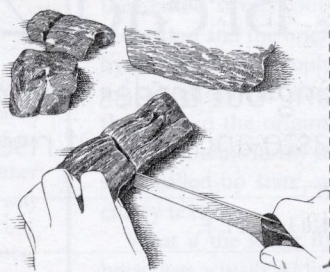
TEST KITCHEN WINNER:

➤ AMORE Tomato Paste

10 STEPS TO BETTER STEW

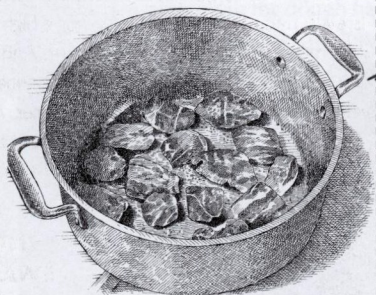
1. CUT YOUR OWN MEAT

Packaged stew meat is often made up of irregularly shaped scraps that cook at varying rates. Cut your own stew meat to guarantee same-sized chunks that share the same flavor and cooking time. Use fatty, flavorful cuts from the shoulder, or chuck, that will stay moist with extended cooking.



2. SKIP THE FLOUR BEFORE BROWNING

Contrary to popular belief, dusting meat with flour before searing it doesn't help it brown better. In fact, we have found just the opposite. The flour itself darkens a little, but the meat remains pale and doesn't develop the intense flavor compounds that are the goal of browning. Instead of flouring, pat stew meat dry and season it with salt and pepper before browning.

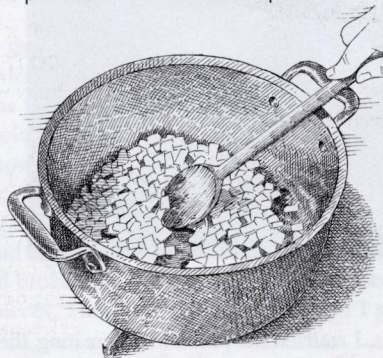


3. BROWN MEAT PROPERLY

Crowding the pan with too much meat or using inadequate heat can cause meat to steam (rather than brown) and ultimately lose flavor. To avoid this problem, add the meat only after the oil begins to smoke and leave plenty of space (about ½ inch) between pieces (this means no more than 1 pound of meat per batch). Turn only when the first side is well seared.

4. IF FOND BURNS, REMOVE IT

Browning meat in more than two batches can lead to a pan covered by burnt (rather than browned) fond that can impart a bitter flavor to the stew. If the fond is blackening, add a little water to the empty pot and scrape the fond to loosen it. Discard burnt bits and water and wipe the pot clean. Add fresh oil and proceed with the next batch of meat.



5. SAUTÉ AROMATICS TO ENHANCE FLAVOR

Recipes that call for dumping spices and aromatics, such as garlic and onion, into the pot at the same time as the liquid fail to maximize their flavor. So hold the liquid and sauté these flavor-enhancing ingredients first.

6. FLOUR AROMATICS TO THICKEN STEW

Many recipes call for thickening a stew at the end of cooking by leaving the lid off, but this method risks overcooking. Thicken stew at the beginning of the cooking process by sprinkling flour over the sautéed aromatics. Cook the flour for a minute or two to remove any raw flour taste.



7. STAGGER ADDITION OF VEGETABLES

When vegetables are dumped indiscriminately into the pot at the outset of cooking, they not only lose flavor and turn mushy, but also water down the stew. Take into account the cooking time of individual vegetables (see "How Long Does It Take: Vegetables," above) and add them at the appropriate time.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE: VEGETABLES

Below are some common stew vegetables and general guidelines for how long to cook them. In many cases, you will be adding the vegetables once the stew has been cooking in the oven for a while.

VEGETABLE	PREPARATION	COOKING TIME
Potatoes	1- to 1½-inch cubes	1 hour
Carrots	sliced ¼ to ½ inch thick	1 hour
Parsnips	sliced ¼ to ½ inch thick	1 hour
Sweet Potatoes	quartered and sliced ¼ inch thick	1 hour
Turnips	½-inch dice	45 minutes
Peppers	½-inch dice	45 minutes
Canned Beans	rinsed	45 minutes
Frozen Vegetables	do not thaw	15 to 20 minutes
Hearty Greens	washed and chopped	20 to 30 minutes
Tender Greens	washed and chopped	1 to 2 minutes
Fresh Herbs	chopped	Stir in off heat

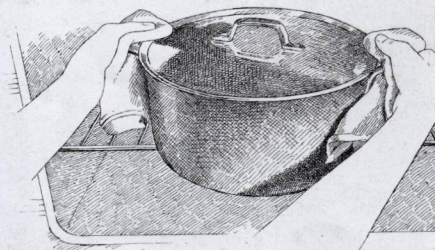
HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE: MEAT

Because meat varies in moisture and fat content, pinpointing cooking times is not an exact science. The chart below offers general guidelines.

MEAT	CUBE SIZE	APPROX. COOKING TIME
Beef, Pork, and Lamb	1 to 1½ inches	2 to 2½ hours
Beef, Pork, and Lamb	1½ to 2 inches	2½ to 3 hours
Chicken Thighs	whole	30 to 60 minutes

8. SIMMER STEW IN OVEN

To ensure a steady, gentle simmer that allows the internal temperature of the meat to rise slowly and eliminates the risk of scorching the pot bottom, cook the stew in a covered Dutch oven at 300 degrees. This will keep the temperature of the stewing liquid below the boiling point (212 degrees) and ensure meat that is tender, not tough.



9. COOK MEAT UNTIL FALL-APART TENDER

When meat is undercooked, its fat and connective tissue have not had the chance to break down sufficiently, and it will taste rubbery and tough. Cook meat to the point where collagen has melted down into gelatin. This yields tender meat that separates easily when pulled apart with two forks. (See "How Long Does It Take: Meat," above.)



10. DEFAT BEFORE SERVING

Pour stew liquid into a narrow container before defatting. This will create a thicker layer of fat that's easier to remove. Alternatively, refrigerate the stew overnight. When the fat solidifies, it can be lifted right off.

