

flat spoon. Remove and discard the bay leaves. Carefully open the foil packet (watch for steam), then stir the vegetables along with any accumulated juices into the stew. Stir in the remaining 1 teaspoon thyme and the peas and let stand until the peas are heated through, about 5 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.

PREP-AHEAD TIPS

Store the ingredients below separately.

- Cook the onion mixture as described in step 1, then transfer it to an airtight container and refrigerate.
- Trim and cut the meat and refrigerate.
- Prepare the carrots and refrigerate.

SLOW-COOKER POT ROAST

POT ROAST RECIPES APPEAR IN EVERY COOKBOOK featuring slow cookers and are touted as "starter" recipes in the ubiquitous manuals that come with the appliance. Pot roast is a natural for the slow cooker when done right. The problem is that many slow-cooker pot roasts turn out dry and stringy, floating in a vat of greasy, flavorless, watery liquid. Yet another issue is size; yes, it does matter what size roast you start out with. We found many recipes that called for 2½- to 3-pound roasts pulled a virtual disappearing act. After 10 hours in the slow cooker, the catch phrase "Where's the beef?" took on new meaning. We had our work cut out for us.

Our initial testing showed that the average chuck roast shrunk by as much as two pounds during the prolonged cooking time, quickly eliminating the smaller roasts. To compensate for this shrinkage, we decided to use roasts that weighed 5½ to 6 pounds. Previous pot roast tests had shown that reaching and sustaining an internal temperature of 200 to 210 degrees was necessary for a meltingly tender piece of meat. To determine how long it would take a 5- or 6-pound roast to reach that point in the slow cooker, we conducted tests using temperature

probes inserted into the center of roasts cooked on both low and high. The ideal time (in our 6-quart slow cooker) was 9 to 10 hours on low or 5 to 6 hours on high. Next, we moved on to flavoring our pot roast.

As with our other slow-cooker recipes for this book, we wanted to skip browning the meat before adding it to the slow cooker. We were worried that this would have an adverse affect with such a large cut of meat, but we were actually pleased to find that after 10 hours in the slow cooker, both the flavor and exterior color of the roast were fine. That said, to make up for the loss of flavor that comes with browning meat and deglazing the pan, we added soy sauce to the mix. Combined with sautéed aromatics, chicken broth, red wine, tomato paste, and crushed tomatoes, our braising liquid was now full flavored, and was at a good jumping-off point for our final "gravy." After all, what's pot roast without gravy? We wanted our gravy to be thick enough to coat the slices of pot roast, without being pasty. To that end, we tried cornstarch, flour (neither of which could be added at the onset of cooking), and even corn tortillas. In the end, instant tapioca proved to be the ideal thickener since it could be added at the beginning of cooking without imparting an off-flavor to the dish. Finished with a hefty amount of chopped fresh parsley, this was a tender pot roast with a flavorful gravy.

Slow-Cooker Pot Roast

SERVES 6 TO 8

In most markets, you will have to special order a large 5½- to 6-pound chuck roast. Alternatively, you can use two 3-pound roasts (which are common in most markets). The pot roast will shrink significantly as it cooks. Serve with rice or mashed potatoes.

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 3 medium onions, minced
- 2 carrots, cut into 1-inch chunks
- 8 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 8 teaspoons)
- ¼ cup tomato paste

Salt

- ¾ cup dry red wine
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 (5½- to 6-pound) boneless beef chuck-eye roast, tied at 1-inch intervals
- ¾ cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 6 tablespoons Minute tapioca
- ⅓ cup soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, or 1 teaspoon dried
- ¼ cup minced fresh parsley leaves
- Ground black pepper

1. Heat the oil in a 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat until shimmering but not smoking. Add the onions, carrots, garlic, tomato paste, and ¼ teaspoon salt and cook until the vegetables are softened and lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the wine and tomatoes, scraping up any browned bits; set aside.

2. Lay the roast in the slow cooker insert. Add the broth, tapioca, soy sauce, and thyme to the onion and tomato mixture, then pour it over the roast. Cover and cook on low until the meat is tender, 9 to 11 hours. (Alternatively, cover and cook on high for 6 to 7 hours.)

3. Transfer the roast to a carving board; set aside to rest. Let the cooking liquid settle for 5 minutes then gently tilt the slow cooker insert and degrease as much fat as possible off the surface of the sauce using a large flat spoon. Stir in the parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Untie the roast and slice into ½-inch-thick pieces. Arrange the meat on a warmed serving platter and pour 1 cup of the sauce over the top. Serve, passing the remaining sauce separately.

PREP-AHEAD TIPS

You can store all the ingredients below together with the exception of the meat, which must be refrigerated separately.

- Cook the onion and tomato mixture as described in step 1, then transfer it to an airtight container and refrigerate.
- Trim and tie the roast and refrigerate.
- Prep the carrots and refrigerate.

➤ VARIATION

Slow-Cooker Southwestern-Style Pot Roast

For a milder flavor, use the smaller amount of chipotle chiles.

Follow the recipe for Slow-Cooker Pot Roast, adding 3 tablespoons chili powder and 2 tablespoons ground cumin with the onions in step 1. Eliminate the wine, increase the chicken broth to 1½ cups, and add 2 to 4 tablespoons minced chipotle chile in adobo sauce with the broth in step 2. Substitute 1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano (or 1 teaspoon dried) for the thyme. Replace the parsley in step 4 with 2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro leaves.

SLOW-COOKER BEEF GOULASH

GOULASH IS A HUNGARIAN STEW, MADE with chunks of beef, flavored with Hungarian paprika, and finished with sour cream. When made correctly, it's rich and satisfying. The problem is that it's not easy to get it right in the slow cooker, and our first attempts turned out watery and bland.

Beef, onions, garlic, and paprika are the constants in this dish. Other possible ingredients include potatoes, tomatoes, and bell peppers. Our goal was to create a very simple stew with tender, flavorful beef and browned onions in a rich, intensely flavored sauce. The sauce would be thick red in color, both from the paprika and from the good browning that the onions would receive.

As with our beef stew (page 142), we found that chuck roast is the best choice because it cooks up tender and flavorful. And, in keeping with our findings from our beef stew testing, the meat for the goulash went into the slow cooker unbrowned, so we knew that replacing the brown fond would be no less important in this recipe. To begin with, we cooked the onions to a nice golden brown and then stirred in tomato paste and a hefty quantity of good-quality Hungarian paprika, cooking it until it reached a deep brown. This pretoasting of the tomato paste and paprika added the traditional deep rust color that we were looking for and