

MISS FINKLEDYE'S STEW

One of my favorite things about the cooler and wetter weather is that now I feel like eating hearty one-pot stews, which are some of my favorite foods. Whether it be something French and fancy, like *coq au vin* or *boeuf a la bourgingon*, or something exotic like an Indian or Pakistani curry or a Moroccan couscous, or something as simple as good old American beef stew, these slow-cooked dishes are some of my favorites.

Plain old American beef stew comes to us largely from our German ancestors, many of whom emigrated to the Mid-West, where today you get some wonderful, hearty German-inspired cooking. My beef stew recipe was given to me by my mother, who got it from her mother, who got it from her mother-in-law, my great-grandmother Nora. But Nora didn't make it up—she got it from her great good friend, Ermengarde Finkledye, an elderly maiden lady of German ancestry, who moved to Santa Cruz from St. Louis sometime around the 1890s. Ms. Finkledye only used five flavoring ingredients besides salt and pepper; ketchup, cider vinegar, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce, and bay leaves. Once again, my measurements are totally imprecise.

Take about 2 pounds of beef for stew. The stew beef sold in the supermarkets is usually cut up in larger pieces than I like, so I usually cut the pieces in half. Then take about 3 pounds of root vegetables. I like a mixture of carrots, turnips, potatoes, parsnips, maybe some rutabaga—plus a couple of large onions and about half a pound of small boiling onions. Peel and trim the root vegetables, cutting them into pieces about the same size as the meat, or maybe a little bit bigger. Peel and trim the boiling onions and leave them whole. Peel and chop the two large onions. Make sure you have a couple of cans of beef broth on hand. Now you're ready to start cooking.

Dust the stew meat with a tablespoon of flour, and salt and pepper. Over medium-high heat, heat a couple of tablespoons of oil in the bottom of a large covered stew pot or Dutch oven. When the oil is hot, I like to put in the root vegetables and brown them for a few minutes, until they just get a little color on them. I think it intensifies the flavor. Scoop the vegetables into a large bowl. Add another tablespoon or so of oil to the pot, and when hot, brown the beef quickly. You may need to do this in a couple of batches.

Then remove the beef and put it in another bowl. Add the chopped onion to the drippings remaining in the pot and stir until softened. Add the beef and the beef broth, plus a bay leaf or two, bring to the boil, cover and turn the heat down and simmer for a couple of hours. Now add the root vegetables and the whole boiling onions. Cover and simmer for a half hour or so. Add salt and pepper to taste, and about three tablespoons of ketchup, a tablespoon of cider vinegar, a tablespoon or a little more of brown sugar, and a teaspoon of Worcestershire sauce.

These are all approximations—adjust the seasonings until you get a blend you like. It should be a little bit sweet-and-sour. Cover and simmer for another 10 or 15 minutes for the flavors to set. Now thicken the gravy with a paste of water and flour, called a slurry. Or I like to shake in some Wondra flour, which is a mixture of flour and cornstarch. If using a flour slurry, it will need to cook for another 10 minutes or so. If using the Wondra flour, just stir until it thickens up to the consistency you like.

I serve this with some biscuits. The various kinds of Pillsbury pop and fresh biscuits work just fine, although they need to be eaten up right away and don't hold up well after they've cooled. A hearty beer is the perfect accompaniment to this stew, although Ms. Finkledye wouldn't have approved, as she was a teetotaler. So here's to you, Ms. Finkledye. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.