

Stew Secrets

With the chill of winter, nothing feeds the soul quite like a hearty and thick bowl of stew. Stews are found in nearly all of the world's cuisines. Stew is a meat, poultry, or fish dish, generally with vegetables, cooked in liquid in a closed pot over low heat.

The difference between an awesome and a mediocre beef stew is all about ingredients, cooking times, and cooking temperature. Incorporate these techniques to perfect your stew.

Buy your meat in large pieces so that you are certain you know what you are using. Buying pre-cut stew meat makes it difficult to tell how it will taste or its texture. If I were going to pick an economical cut, it would be a boneless beef chuck steak or roast with its great flavor and a good ratio of lean to fat to connective tissue.

The next step in a stew is to sear the beef in a Dutch oven that is hot. Searing it over high heat gives the meat a deeper, richer flavor. Don't cube the meat before searing. If using a roast, slice it into two or three steaks. Sear the meat in batches to avoid steaming the meat. Once the steaks have been seared and rested, cut them into relatively large pieces, about 1 1/2 to 2 inches, so the meat stays more moist and juicy.

Spices provide the stew's flavor profile. Adding dried spices along with searing meat or onions releases their essential oils. Dried spices are added at the beginning of the cooking process. Fresh herbs are added at the end of the cooking process because they lose their flavor as they simmer.

Mirepoix forms the aromatic base for various savory dishes. It's a simple mixture of three or more chopped vegetables, including onion, carrots, and celery. Sautéed slowly and without browning in butter or oil.

Searing the meat and sauteing the vegetables creates browned bits on the pan. Releasing them with a splash of apple juice, beer, broth, wine, or water creates the basis for an incredibly flavorful stew.

Consider using low-sodium chicken stock instead of beef stock. It's less rich than beef broth, allowing the flavors of the ingredients to shine more.

Vegetables cook much quicker than beef, so there's no reason to add them to the pot simultaneously. Add hearty root vegetables like carrots, parsnips, potatoes, turnips, or winter squash halfway through cooking. Save tender vegetables for the end.

Adding flour to stew is the most classic way to create its thick texture. Add one to two tablespoons of flour for every cup of liquid. Make a slurry, a mixture of equal parts cold water and flour, whisk together until smooth. Mix the slurry into the stew, stirring to prevent lumps, and then bring it to a boil for a few minutes.

Arrowroot and cornstarch are gluten-free alternatives to thickening with flour. They'll also keep the sauce clear and cloud-free. For every cup of liquid in the recipe, use 1 tablespoon. Mix cornstarch with equal cold water or liquid to create a slurry and pour it into the stew. Stir continuously over high heat until the cornstarch is well incorporated and the sauce thickens.

Tomato paste can be added to beef stews as a thickener. Add it at the beginning of the process or whisk it in near the end.

For most stews, it takes time to develop the flavor. Stew meat needs at least two hours to break down the collagen and become tender. If you try to rush the stew by boiling, the muscle fibers will shrink and become tough.

When the stew is finished, taste it. Add some finishing flavors to bring it to the next level if it tastes off-balance. Add soy sauce or Worcestershire for extra savory flavor, brown sugar or even a touch of honey for sweetness, vinegar or lemon zest for brightness, chili powder or smoked paprika for spice and depth.

Enjoy stews in the chilling winter months when the days are short and the nights are long.