

The Virtues of BRAISING

*Slow Cooking Your Way
to Bigger Profits*



As the cold weather wears on and the memories of sunburns and sand castles fade, our customers' palettes yearn for the richer and deeper flavors of slow-cooked, one-pot delicacies. Maybe it's a Sunday pot roast or meat sauce, slowly simmering away and steaming up the windows while the snow drifts outside and the football announcers chatter away on TV. Or maybe it's a favorite stew or soup we had once that "hit the spot" when we needed it most. Either way, braised food has a way of needling in on you. It sticks to you, literally, and once you smell its slow evolution on a stove over the course of a short winter day, it's not easily forgotten.

Recently, in food magazines and television shows, braising has been lost in an overworked and hence undervalued category we've come to call "comfort food," squashed somewhere between mashed potatoes and meatloaf. While there's no arguing with comforting food, braising is much, much more than an emotional journey to one's childhood. It's a great way to slow-cook your profits, tenderize the toughest customers, and enrich your restaurant's bottom line.

The virtues of braising are many. First and foremost, braising is a cooking method specifically designed to maximize value, something we struggle to do every day in this business. It was born out of the need to turn those inexpensive, tough, and unloved cuts into something edible and nutritious. As recipes were refined and customs aged, these dishes became namesakes of ethnic and regional cooking, and ultimately, dishes people would go out of their way for, and even travel at great expense! When the lowly shanks and knuckles were once tossed and fought over by the butcher's dogs, we are now paying as much for them as center cut choice steaks. (How's that for maximizing value?!) Essentially, braising has taken the worthless to the most valuable. Braising also has a way of sweetening and concentrating flavors, taking the bitter, boring, and inexpensive to sweet, satisfying, and priceless. A braised item on the menu also insinuates value. Veal osso bucco and beef short rib on the menu conjure images of a long, slow, painful process dotted over for hours by wise and carefully trained cooks – a dish for which any customer is fully prepared to pay top dollar. Finally, braising enriches foods which may otherwise go



VEAL OSSO BUCCO WITH CARAMELIZED ONIONS, BRAISED LEEK COUSCOUS, AND BROCCOLI RABE

YIELDS: 4 Servings



unnoticed. Don't believe me? Who reading this right now doesn't make a beeline right for the carrots in even the most mediocre rendition of pot roast? With a little sprinkle of sea salt and cracked pepper, it doesn't get any better than that. And it all started with a humble 10-cent carrot. That's the magic of braising, and it can work magic for your restaurant too.

Traditionally, braising means to sear or caramelize a meat or vegetable in fat and then cook it at low temperatures with moist heat, often with a nominal amount of liquid, until tender. When we hear the word *braise*, many of us immediately think of veal osso bucco or beef short ribs, and these are certainly qualified representatives. But what about braised fennel (See recipe, page 11.), chicken osso bucco, beef flatiron, or even lamb shanks? (See recipe, page 7.) What about braising stone fruits like plums or peaches for dessert? How about braised butternut squash, root vegetables, or even pumpkin!? We'll cover these fabulous ideas and more, but let's discuss clearing the hurdles we may have faced when trying to translate braising into an a la carte situation.

Here's a question that comes up frequently: *"Chef, Grandma's lamb shank steaming up the windows on Sunday in January is all well and good, but Grandma isn't about to become a line cook in my kitchen! How am I supposed to do what she does in my restaurant?"*

Good question. In essence, it's one I hear often: "How do we effectively leverage the virtues of home/ethnic cooking, like braising, in a restaurant setting?" On the following page are some tips on translating braising into a commercial environment.

VEAL OSSO BUCCO

106212	4 ea. Veal Shanks, 14–16 oz.	097210	8 ea. Peeled Garlic Clove, crushed
370851	4 Tbsp. Vegetable Oil	305422	1 cup Red Wine
345029	Sea Salt and	289336	6 cups Chicken Broth
345632	Pepper to taste	079982	2 cups Veal Demi Glace
097504	2 ea. Large Yellow Onions, large dice	345115	1 Bay Leaf
		097302	2 sprigs Fresh Thyme

DIRECTIONS

1. Over medium-high heat, heat 2 Tbsp. of vegetable oil. Season veal shanks with salt and pepper and sear both sides until deep golden brown. Set aside.
2. Over medium-high heat in a braising pan large enough to fit all of the ingredients, heat remaining 2 Tbsp. of vegetable oil. Add onions and garlic, then saute until they start to brown. Turn heat down to medium and continue cooking, stirring occasionally until onions and garlic are deep brown, sweet, and caramelized.
3. Deglaze with red wine and reduce until almost dry. Add chicken broth and veal demi-glace and bring to simmer. Add bay leaf and thyme.
4. Add seared veal shanks and cover. Place in 325°F oven and braise for 2–3 hours or until inserted fork turns 180°F with little resistance. Remove from heat and let stand 15 minutes.
5. Remove veal shanks and reserve. Over medium heat, simmer braising liquid until slightly thickened. Remove from heat, remove bay leaf and thyme stems, divide sauce between 4 veal shanks in prep containers, and cool properly. Reserve for service.

LEEKs

097330	4 Leeks, washed, bottoms and tops trimmed to white and light green parts only, about 3–5"	097210	2 ea. Peeled Garlic Clove, crushed
		345115	1 Bay Leaf
		097302	2 sprigs Fresh Thyme
289336	4 cup Chicken Broth	370860	¼ cup Olive Oil
		345029	Sea Salt and
		345632	Pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Place all ingredients in saucepan, making sure leeks are just covered. Bring to simmer, cover, and braise for 30–45 minutes until leeks are cooked through and very tender. Cool properly in braising liquid.
2. Once cool, remove leeks from braising liquid and gently slice into 1" lengths. Store in prep container with just enough braising liquid to cover.

(Recipe continued on page 20)

TIPS ON BRAISING

Tip #1:

A braise of any kind has a window of time when it's perfect, and the easiest time to capture it is in the morning or during a slow prep time, not at 7:30 on a Friday night with a board full of dupes. I suggest braising an item like osso bucco, lamb shanks, or beef short ribs first thing in the morning, and then properly chilling it. In the afternoon or next day, it can be properly portioned with the appropriate amount of braising liquid and vegetables, placed into a portion container, and finally it's ready for mise en place. Once ordered, a simple reheat in the oven and a quick finish with a fresh touch like herbs or gremolata and you're home free. Holding a braise hot in an Alto-Shaam usually results in overcooking, destroying product, or inconsistent portioning. Do it ahead of time and it will become the easiest pickup of the night and a friend of quality control in any kitchen.

Tip #2:

The microwave is your friend, not the tool of a hack. When reheating delicate items like braised vegetables or fruits, just nuke 'em! Why take up valuable oven and burner space or run the risk of scorching a carefully executed vegetable or fruit braise when all that's needed is a quick warm-up? I often braised vegetables and fruits ahead of time (see above), chilled them, and then portioned in disposable containers like food trays. No dishes, easy pickup, and a time saver.

Tip #3:

Deconstruct difficult-to-portion items. Not everyone is cut out to eat a whole lamb or pork shank, and to some the bone can become unwieldy and cumbersome on the plate. Also, shank sizes can vary depending on how they are packed. I overcame all of these obstacles by braising shanks ahead of time, chilling them, and then removing the muscle groups surrounding the lamb or pork shank. The egg-sized nodes of meat can then be portioned with the appropriate amount of braising liquid, and then packaged for the line. This allows much easier presentations and prevents the sliding-shank-on-a-plate syndrome. Other benefits can be increased amounts of portions from a case and the creation of smaller-sized pieces of braised meat, which can be used for appetizers like risotto or pasta. This can greatly help with food cost.

Veal Osso Bucco with Caramelized Onions, Braised Leek Couscous, and Broccoli Rabe

(Recipe continued from page 19)

COUSCOUS

331565 Couscous

Prepare the couscous per manufacturer's instructions. Cool properly, fluff with a fork, and reserve for service.

BROCCOLI RABE

097060 1 lb. Broccoli Rabe, washed

DIRECTIONS

Bring a 8-quart pot of well-salted water to a rolling boil. Blanch broccoli rabe for 1–2 minutes until al dente. Shock in ice water, drain, and reserve for service.

SERVICE

000110 Whole Butter
097526 Flat Leaf Parsley Chiffonade
289336 Chicken Broth
345029 Sea Salt and
345632 Pepper to taste

1. Place osso bucco along with sauce in saute pan, cover with tented foil or lid, and reheat in 400°F oven for 10–15 minutes until heated through.
2. In saute pan over medium heat, melt 2 Tbsp. of butter. Add broccoli rabe and saute for 1–2 minutes until heated through. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
3. In saute pan, add 1 cup of braised leeks, 2 Tbsp. of butter and ½ cup of leek braising liquid. Bring to simmer. Add 2 cups of cooked couscous and 2 Tbsp. of parsley, toss to combine, and heat through. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
4. Divide couscous between 4 dinner plates. Place osso bucco on couscous and ladle over sauce. Divide broccoli rabe between plates and serve.

As you can see, braising needn't be difficult or challenging. When executed as we've described, braising can increase the value of inexpensive ingredients, maximize labor, save you time and aggravation during service, and add value to your customers' dining experience. The virtues of braising are easy to sell, as your customers recognize the time and effort that go into such dishes. The ease with which you can now do them will be our little secret! In this issue of *Essence* you will find many different recipe ideas, and my hope is that you will find inspiration to continue to experiment with many of your own. As always, the culinary team at Maines is here to help, guide, and inspire.

We wish you good cooking!