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# Tenderizing Tough Cuts

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Braised Beef Short Ribs thinkstock

Braising presents a savory solution for less-expensive cuts of meat.

The age-old method of simmering foods in liquid to tenderize tougher cuts of meat has made a comeback. Amid serious sous-vide fervor, some say braising fell into the shadows. Yet, with rising protein prices driving whole animal butchery and value-centered sourcing, the textbook braising technique has found a new niche among tradition-minded, local-food-focused chefs.

In fact, the National Restaurant Association's 2014 What's Hot chef survey found braising earned top-trend status with 39 percent of the vote. Combined with the 57 percent of chefs who view inexpensive, underused cuts of meat such as brisket, shoulder, and skirt steak as worthwhile options, braising's renewed appeal will likely continue.

"Braised dishes fell out of fashion at one point because there was a perspective that they missed that freshness and vitality so popular today," says Bill Briwa, chef-instructor at The Culinary Institute of America Greystone Campus in St. Helena, California.

"The truth is, there is almost no downside to braising," Briwa says. "You end up with an incredibly flavorful, tender piece of meat that's inexpensive, readily available, and easy to put on a plate." Add some acid and herbs as in a gremolata, and the freshness returns.

Braising combines the best of two worlds, Briwa says: "On one hand, you get the benefit of flavor from perfectly browned meat, and gently simmering over lower heat until the connective tissue breaks down helps tenderize any toughness while the melting gelatin creates that rich mouthfeel. The meat actually tastes better the longer it cooks because braising helps fully develop that savory flavor."

Move over, pot roast, as chefs get more creative with their braising techniques. Tougher cuts like lamb shanks can easily be tenderized first, then finished on the grill for a smoky flavor and caramelized crust in a backwards, braising-browning approach.

At Ox in Portland, Oregon, chef/owner Greg Denton rubs lamb shoulders with cocoa powder for a smoky richness, soaks it in leftover whey from homemade ricotta for two days to tenderize and clean the meat, then browns and braises it in a tomato and white wine mixture with mirepoix, garlic, and dried herbs for two hours in a 350-degree oven. The liquid, skimmed of its fat, is used to top off the dish with red-wine-soaked prunes, fresh herbs, and seasonal vegetables.



### Maximizing Meals

Any cut but a tender one is best for braising, and this is precisely the reason for braising's comeback. With rising prices for beef and pork, braising makes cheaper cuts of meat from more heavily exercised parts of the animal—like the back, leg, and shoulder—more palatable. Braising can also be used for other value cuts such as ranch steak, flat iron, or shoulder, and it helps break down and boost the flavor of offal.

While braising works for budget-minded restaurants looking to lower food costs and boost per-dish profits, it's also beneficial for those using whole animals and butchering in-house.

"If you are working with a local farm and have to bring in the whole animal or more primal cuts, you need to use all the parts to make it financially viable," Briwa says.

Take beef, where 40 percent of the animal might be tender enough to sauté or grill but the remaining 60 percent requires grinding, braising, or another tenderizing technique. Denton, who

receives over 100 pounds of lamb meat weekly, much of it from a nearby farm in Washington, knows the value of braising for that reason.

Braising also cuts down on waste because perishable meat can be tenderized ahead of time, then cooled, stored, and quickly grilled or sautéed to finish as needed, Briwa says.

### **Infusing Flavor**

“Braising for me is less about tenderizing and more about infusing flavors like brining or marinating,” Denton says. “For larger cuts, I prefer it over sous vide, which can create a sponginess because you’re missing the hard sear you get when braising. Even on hot days [when diners often opt to eat lighter], we easily sell braised dishes because of the flavor profile.”

Braising brings a new dimension to vegetable cooking, as well, and helps beef up vegetarian entrées. At Hospoda in New York City, Chef Rene Stein browns and slow-simmers tougher, heartier vegetables in their own juices to tenderize and perk up natural flavors. He sautés earthy, local purple carrots in a cast-iron pan with shallots and garlic, deglazes with vinegar, then simmers the vegetables in carrot juice for an hour until soft. The cooking liquid makes a tasty, vegan demi-glace when thickened with arrowroot.

Celery earns the same treatment: braised in its own juice and served whole with a celery root purée, celery-butter sauce, celery salt, and celery micro greens.

### **Hands-Off Cooking**

Another advantage of braising is that cooks can “set it and forget it.”

“After the browning process, it doesn’t require any extra attention, and at the end of the cooking time, you have something very flavorful and tender while the cooking liquid becomes your sauce,” says Briwa. “It’s not uncommon for a restaurant to put a pot in the oven at the end of service and let it cook overnight.”

Historically, cooks would braise meat in Dutch ovens over the dying embers of a live fire for slow-low cooking, says Briwa. And while modern methods involve a burner or convection oven, some chefs use combination ovens to brown and braise meat. Combination ovens offer even more hands-off cooking thanks to timers and customizable settings that allow cooks to pop in the protein, close the door, and walk away.

In an era of tight budgets, trend-setting dishes, and farm-focused food, braising brings a waste-not, easy method of cooking that continues to stand the test of time.