

# Changing Up The Flavor Of Your Stew

BY JUDY HEVRDEJS  
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Cooking smart means more than perfectly poaching an egg. It also means maximizing your kitchen time and dollars.

And mastering a basic beef stew.

Beef stew has impeccable comfort-food credentials. It's easily doubled or tripled, and freezes well. And once you've simmered the stew base of browned beef cubes and onions, it can be divided into meal-size portions for your family. Use one portion immediately. A second or third can be frozen, then transformed weeks later into a different dish.

Depending on ingredients added to the base, it can take on a French accent (wine, mushrooms), a Belgian carbonnade (beer, bacon, onions), a Southwestern chili (tomatoes, chilies), classic American (potatoes, carrots, peas) and more.

You may even win over left-overs haters.

"The first thing that one should remember about making stews is that it's nearly impossible to screw up a stew," says Clifford A. Wright, whose book, "One-Pot Wonders" (Wiley, \$23.99), features a dozen or so beef stews, including a goulash and Colombian cocido with peas, carrots, potatoes and corn. "There really is no such thing as overcooking a stew, but there sure is a thing called undercooking it, which isn't a problem because undercooking simply means you cook longer."

With a basic beef stew, the Santa Monica, Calif.-based author and cooking teacher might stir in drained canned kidney beans or white beans. Or green vegetables, a long-simmering kale, collard or Swiss chard, or quick-cooking spinach or green beans. If a bit of tomato paste is languishing in his refrigerator, that may go in. So could macaroni, though he notes it may need a longer cooking time than directed on the box.

"As long as you've got a good sense of what you're doing," Wright says, "because you've got the base, you can start mixing up different culinary cultures."

Get creative and come up with your own variation on the beef stew theme, following Wright's formula.

**NOW YOU'RE STEWING**

Clifford Wright's beef stew tips:

Cuts from the chuck or round work best. "You cook them a long time, which melts the connective tissue (and) makes the whole piece of meat taste so flavorful and tender."

Look for huge pieces of meat on sale and cut it in cubes. "If it's a 4-pound piece, I may get two or three meals out of that."

You don't have to brown the meat. But "we like to brown it, especially if it's floured. It creates a thickener for the sauce that makes the gravy — plus it creates another level of flavor when the caramelized flour on the beef gets crusty."

Don't crowd the beef or it will steam, not brown. Don't overlap pieces. You may need to work in batches.

"You want to brown it fast, not quickly. ... On medium-high heat, it's going to brown in 5 to 8 minutes."

Choose a stewing liquid. "If you want to play with flavors down the line, go with water. But if you've got an idea in mind right from the get-go, then you can use beef stock, wine."

General tips:

Think about colors, textures and complementary flavors.

Unsure of where to start? Check out Elisabeth Rozin's "The Flavor-Principle Cookbook." She details how similar ingredients in stews and similar dishes will take on the flavor profile of different cuisines by changing an element. Olive oil and tomato are basic Mediterranean flavors. Add garlic for Italian, saffron for Spanish, mixed herbs for French Provençal, or cinnamon and/or lemon for Greek.

Can't use flour? Brown meat without dredging, then simmer. During the final hour of cooking, crush potatoes or use another starch (corn or potato) to thicken; also reduce liquid atop the stove.

Package and label properly; store at zero degrees or below for two to three months.

Don't freeze potatoes; they don't hold well.

Defrost in the refrigerator. Add varied ingredients during reheating.

Change up side dishes (pasta, polenta, potatoes, crusty bread) to enjoy the sauce or gravy.

**BEEF STEW**

Prep: 20 minutes  
Cook: 2 hours, 15 minutes  
Makes: 8 servings

This recipe adapted from Clifford A. Wright's "One-Pot Wonders" may be doubled or tripled easily. We've doubled the recipe here to facilitate freezing a batch for another meal.

3 1/2 pounds boneless beef chuck, cut into bite-size pieces  
1/2 cup flour  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
Freshly ground pepper  
6 tablespoons unsalted butter or beef suet  
2 medium onions, chopped  
4 cups cold water

1. Dredge beef in the flour; season with salt and pepper. In a large heavy flameproof baking casserole or stew pot, melt butter over medium-high heat. Add the meat, in batches if necessary; brown on all sides, about 8 minutes total. Add onion; cook, stirring and scraping bottom of the

pot until softened, about 4 minutes.

2. Pour in water to barely cover; reduce heat to low. Stir a bit then simmer, partially covered, until tender, about 2 hours. Check for seasoning. Finish with one of the variations below; or freeze half and cook the other half.

Freeze: Divide the finished stew in half. Cook one half following a variation below. Spoon remaining half into a freezer-safe container, leaving about 1-inch headroom. Cool then cover, label and store in freezer up to 3 months.

Cook: Remove half recipe of stew from freezer. Thaw in refrigerator overnight. Place thawed stew in a heavy stew pot; heat to a simmer on low heat. Proceed with a variation from below or create your own.

**VARIATIONS**

American style, based on Wright's basic beef stew: Add 1

pound potatoes (red, white, Yukon gold), peeled cubed; 1 1/2 carrots, scraped, diced; 1 large parsnip, scraped, diced; 1 medium turnip, peeled, diced. Continue cooking and stirring occasionally until everything is very tender, about 1 hour.

French style, our take on beef bourguignon: Dice 2 slices bacon. Cook in a skillet over medium heat with 1 chopped clove garlic and 1/2 pound mushrooms until bacon begins to brown. Add to stew with 1 cup red wine (Burgundy or merlot) and 1 teaspoon herbs de provence. Continue cooking and stirring occasionally, about 1 hour.

Spanish style, based on Wright's beef stew of La Mancha: Seed and slice 2 green peppers. Add to stew with 1 can each: drained chickpeas, diced tomatoes with juices; 1 clove garlic, minced; 1 bay leaf; a pinch of ground cloves and a pinch of saffron. Continue cooking and stirring occasionally, about 1 hour.



BILL HOGAN/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/MCT  
**Beef stew has impeccable comfort-food credentials. A few ingredients to add to the base include green pepper, tomato, bay leaf and chick peas.**

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