

Oxtail Stew

3 lbs or so oxtails; get a mix between the really meaty ones and the smaller ones, because the marrow from the smaller ones helps thicken the stew too.

I also bought a couple of pounds of cheap boneless beef—it was foreshank, I think, on sale for 50¢ a pound—and added it to give the stew some extra meatiness, plus the last bits of a Crock-Pot roast I'd done.

1 bottle red wine; I used a Cabernet I got on sale for \$5.00, and it was fine

3 cups or so beef stock; I use Better Than Bouillon, and added a spoonful of the chicken Better Than... too, for extra flavor. I also added some beef and chicken Demi-Glace which I got from Williams-Sonoma, but it's not necessary. If you have veal stock or vegetable stock or whatever, throw some of that in too if you like.

1 onion, minced

1 leek, sliced small—I only used about half of my leek and that was plenty.

1 head of garlic; keep about half the cloves whole (but peeled) and mince the other half

1 bag of baby carrots (you could chop up four or five “adult” carrots too, but I just use the bagged baby ones; the price difference isn't that much, at least not in my local store, and it's much easier

3 or 4 parsnips, peeled and sliced

3 sprigs rosemary (I use fresh because it really does make a difference, but you can use a tbsp or so of dried for all of the herbs instead. You can also leave any of them out if you don't like them, or add whatever you like. I think this would be really interesting with Herbs de Provence, for example.)

3 sprigs thyme

2 bay leaves (optional. I like bay leaves so I use them, but you don't have to)

2 sprigs fresh parsley

1 tbsp or so butter

1 tsp or so olive oil

1 tsp or so bacon fat, if you have it

You want a large pot with a good heavy lid, because this is going to cook for like seven hours altogether, and while you want some of the liquid to boil away, you don't want all of it to.

Heat the oil and butter, and bacon fat if you have it, in the pot over medium heat. Sprinkle the oxtails with salt and pepper and sear them on all sides, working in batches; I put the seared ones in a bowl to save the juices and stuff.

After the oxtails are all browned, turn down the heat and add the onions and whole garlic cloves. Cook for a minute until the onion starts to go translucent, and add about half the chopped leek and all of the carrots. Stir all that another minute or two, scraping up the browned bits in the pot.

Pour in about 1/3 of the bottle of wine and finish deglazing the pan. Dump the oxtails back into the pot—make sure you get the juices and everything—and about another 1/3 of the bottle of wine, plus the 3 or 4 cups of stock.

At the point I give it a bit more salt & pepper. After that I add about a tbs or so of Worcestershire, a tsp or so of Kitchen Bouquet, and a dash of soy sauce as well, but all of those are optional.

Give everything a good stir and toss in the bay leaves, rosemary, parsley, and thyme. The liquids should just about cover the oxtails. Cover and simmer on very low heat—just barely a simmer—for three hours or so; I gave it four. Stir occasionally and check the fluid levels. You can add more wine or more stock if you want to, and remove the lid partway for part of the cooking if there seems to be too much liquid. I like my stews quite thick, almost more like fricassees, but not everyone does, so that's up to you.

After the simmering time is up, remove the herbs and throw them out. Remove the oxtails with tongs and put them in a bowl. Cover them, cover the pot, and put it all into the fridge overnight. (Alternatively, you could put the solids in one container and strain the liquid into another, and put that in the freezer for an hour or so.) The point is to get the fat to rise so you can scrape it off, because oxtails are quite fatty. Also, it's fun to see how thick & solid a mass it becomes after being chilled, because of all the gelatin in the bones.

Anyway. The next day or later that day—it's really better the next day, though—scrape off all the fat, then put the pot back on low heat. Shred all of the meat off of the oxtails, and throw away the bones and fat and all that gross stuff. Some people don't shred the oxtails, but I think that makes eating this way too much work. The point of stew is that it isn't work to eat it; I don't want to have to dig around in my food in general, but I especially don't want to have to perform some kind of surgery to eat a stew. I'd rather shred all the meat up ahead of time. It's a surprising amount of meat, it really is. And since I bought that extra cheap shank steak I had tons of meat in mine.

Put the meat back in the pot. Give it a taste once it's hot again and adjust seasonings if necessary. At this point I added the last of the wine and another cup or so of bouillon—beef and chicken mixed again. Simmer covered/partially covered for a couple of hours again.

Peel and slice the parsnips; you can dice them or julienne them or whatever you like, but I just slice them into rounds (and I love parsnips, so I used a lot. If you don't like them, of course, leave them out, but I really recommend you keep them in because the flavor goes so nicely with this). Slice up a bit more of the leek while you're at it, or add the rest of what you sliced the day before. Add those to the stew and give everything another good stir so they're covered. Simmer those, covered or uncovered, for about another 40 minutes or so, again stirring occasionally.

I served this with freshly made mashed potatoes and a loaf of ciabatta bread, but the family didn't care much for the bread. I think next time I'll go with a plain baguette or something. But bread is fantastic with this because you can soak up all that yummy liquid. If you like dumplings, those would also be amazing simmered with this; now that I think of it, in fact, I'm rather irritated at myself for not thinking of that.

It seems like a lot of work, and it is, but it's delicious and it makes a lot of stew, enough to last a few days or have plenty of leftovers to freeze or whatever. And really, once you've done the initial chopping and browning it's pretty simple. The most tedious part is the shredding, but then I'm incredibly picky about what meat is acceptable for my stews, so it takes longer while I inspect it all carefully (I do the same with chicken, even more obsessively).