



Beef stew and a slow cooker make a perfect match—if you can keep the vegetables from turning to mush.

The typical slow-cooker recipe for beef stew has many drawbacks. Ingredients are usually just dumped into the pot and left to their own devices, which means no browning and little flavor. The meat and vegetables heat up, but the flavors never really marry, producing a dish that is watery and flavorless. Who would want to marry those vegetables anyway? They're usually cooked to the point of exhaustion. Potatoes take on an unappetizing brown color, and carrots and parsnips assume the texture of baby food.

I wanted a rich, substantially thick and beefy stew, with lots of root vegetables that would taste the way nature intended. I didn't mind a bit of kitchen prep before I headed off to work in the morning (or the night before), but I didn't want to have to fuss with dinner too much once I got home.

I started with generous pieces of beef chuck (a cut that is ideal for long, slow cooking) and browned them well for maximum flavor. With the browned meat off to the side, I browned onions and added tomato paste—a chef's secret for adding color and flavor to many soups, stews, and sauces.

The stew that resulted from these efforts was pretty good, but not good enough; the color was washed out, and it lacked truly meaty flavor. After several failed attempts, I hit upon an unusual solution: a splash of soy sauce. No one could identify this mystery ingredient,

but everyone in the kitchen appreciated the rich brown color and intense savory flavor it gave the stew.

To thicken the stew, I tried flour, cornstarch, and even potato flakes, but I had the best results with another unlikely ingredient, Minute Tapioca, which is most often used to thicken fruit pies. It withstood the test of time in the slow cooker and thickened the stew without giving it a starchy aftertaste.

The last problem to solve was that of the drab and mushy vegetables. At first I tried roasting them separately and adding them to the pot just before serving. The roasted vegetables tasted great, but an hour of chopping and roasting vegetables pushed the family meal closer to bedtime than dinnertime. Stealing a trick often used in grilling, I made a "hobo pack" by wrapping the vegetables in foil. Then I placed the pack on top of the beef in the slow cooker. It may have looked like a flying saucer, but when I unfolded the foil the aroma of sweet, earthy vegetables filled the kitchen. Frozen peas turned gray in the pack, so I added them to the stew itself at the last minute.

Finally, it was time to test this recipe on my family, who gathered around the table for what was one of the best beef stews we had eaten in a long time. The meat was fork-tender, the broth rich and just thick enough to coat a spoon, and the vegetables were perfectly cooked. I'd trade this stew for the stovetop version any time. —Diane Unger

HEARTY BEEF STEW

SERVES 6 TO 8

If you're going to be away from your slow cooker for more than 10 hours, cutting the vegetables into larger, 1½- to 2-inch pieces will help them retain their texture.

- 5** pounds boneless beef chuck-eye roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch cubes
- Salt and pepper**
- 3** tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4** medium onions, chopped fine
- 1** (6-ounce) can tomato paste
- 2** cups low-sodium chicken or beef broth
- 3** tablespoons soy sauce
- 1** pound carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1** pound parsnips, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1** pound red potatoes, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1½** teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 2** bay leaves
- 2** tablespoons Minute Tapioca
- 2** cups frozen peas, thawed

1. Dry beef with paper towels, then season with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add half of beef and brown on all sides, about 8 minutes. Transfer to slow-cooker insert and repeat with remaining beef (you shouldn't need more oil).

2. Add 1 tablespoon oil, onions, and ¼ teaspoon salt to empty skillet and cook until golden brown, about 6 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring well, for 2 minutes. Add broth and soy sauce, bring to simmer, and transfer to slow-cooker insert.

3. Toss carrots, parsnips, potatoes, ½ teaspoon thyme, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil in bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Wrap vegetables in foil packet that will fit in slow cooker. Stir bay leaves and tapioca into slow-cooker insert; set vegetable packet on top of beef.

4. Set slow cooker to high, cover, and cook for 6 to 7 hours. (Or cook on low for 10 to 11 hours.) Transfer vegetable packet to plate. Carefully open packet (watch for steam) and stir vegetables and juices into stew. Add remaining 1 teaspoon thyme and peas and let stand until heated through. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.