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All praise to the braise. By Matt Preston



Image credit: Craig Wall

There's nothing difficult about braising. It only takes some care and patience. Here are a few simple rules for a mouth-watering and tender meal. Matt Preston reports.

When I think of the best things about the cooler weather — open fires, the return of football, and me singing "che gelida manina, se la lasci riscaldar" from *La Boheme* to the woman I love — a good braise is right up there.



Tricks of the braise.

It doesn't matter whether it's a coq au vin or osso buco; a beer-braised beef cheeks or a bubbling pot of short ribs loaded with all the best aromas of a Chinese grocery; a good braise is like a hug from a 40-tog doona that's just come straight out of the hot dryer.

But what are the secrets of a great braise – rather a lot I realised after sitting down with fellow foodie mate Warren from *delicious magazine* and brainstorming our combined wisdom on what makes a great braise.

1. What is braising?

This cooking technique originated from camp fire pot roasting where a covered pot was buried in the embers of the fire to cook its mostly submerged contents. The word, "braise", comes from the French for "embers".

2. Why braise?

The point of braising is to cook a tougher, cheaper cut of meat, usually from a hard working muscle, and break it down through the slow, moist cooking process. This results in meat with more flavour and a wonderful soft texture.

3. Choose the right cut

Cuts like shoulder, neck, cheek, short rib, belly, leg and shank that have tougher fibres and a decent fat content will break down deliciously.

4. Can you braise other ingredients?

You can braise vegetables and fish but care must be taken. Choose vegetables with a firm structure like cauliflower, leeks, fennel, celery, artichoke, brussels sprouts, and carrots or other root vegetables. Similarly with seafood, you need to pick a fish with robust flesh (rockling, tuna, etc). You'll find that fish steaks will hold together better than fillets. It is best to omit the browning stage for fish. I use the stove top for braising fish but as it is easier to maintain a steady temperature in the oven I use that for most other braises.

5. Choose the right pot

Pick a pot that holds the elements of your braise tightly so you can minimise the amount of liquid used. This will make for a sauce with more intense flavours.

6. Why browning the meat matters

Always brown the meat well. Searing all sides of your cut in a small amount of oil caramelises the natural sugars on the meat to a lovely golden colour all over. This browning will help add to the flavour of the cooking stock.

7. How to brown the meat perfectly

Make sure the meat is dry and the oil and pan hot before you start browning. Use a heavy pan as this retains the heat better. Don't overcrowd the pan when browning as this will help maintain the temperature and ensure the meat browns rather than steams. When turning your meat try to find a part of the pan where the meat wasn't previously as this will be hotter.

8. Deglaze the pan perfectly

After draining the excess fat from the pan, deglaze it to release any caught caramelised browny pieces at the bottom of the pan. You can use anything from boring old water or stock to something that will add acidity and more flavour complexity to deglaze your pan. Use a little of either the stock or the booze featured in the braising ingredients to deglaze the pan.

9. Choose the right oven temperature

Simmer the meat slowly for the best results to ensure that cooking heat is both consistent and gentle. That's why a heavy lidded pot or a foil-covered oven pan work so well for a braise, and also why it is important to ensure that the pot and the braising liquid are already simmering on the stove top before you put it in the oven.

10. How much liquid is enough?

Braising is all about wet and dry heat applied to your protein after browning so you want to ensure the braising liquid covers about three-quarters of the meat or comes two-thirds of the way up the sides.

11. Finishing the braise

It's likely that if you are braising chunks or pieces of meat you'll be serving it straight from the pan with the braising liquid. For a more elegant finish – and especially with faster cooking braises like chicken or fish – think about removing and reserving the protein when it is almost cooked and then skimming off any fat, then straining and reducing the liquid. Return the protein when the sauce is reduced and serve. Feel free to whisk in a little creaminess from cold butter, mascarpone or sour cream to give the sauce a satiny finish. Note, however, that this will mute the original flavours.

With a larger piece of protein like a brisket or a shoulder you'll probably want to remove it to shred or slice. In this case make use of the braising liquid by straining it and then reducing it further to make an accompanying gravy or jus. You want it to be the thickness that coats the back of a wooden spoon well.

- Follow Matt Preston on [twiter.com/mattscravat](https://twitter.com/mattscravat)

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Matt Preston writes for the taste section, available every Tuesday in The Courier Mail, The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun, every Wednesday in The Advertiser and in Perth's Sunday Times.

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