

TONCO FOR A CROWD (GRAVY FOR POLENTA) - Joan Johnson Barker, August 22, 2015

Here is the original recipe: Brown chunks of veal (cut from roast) in olive oil and butter. Add onions and garlic, (not too much) and brown. Add water and later dry red wine. Cook covered until veal is thoroughly done (1-1/2 to 2 hours). Season gravy with salt and quite a bit of pepper. Serve over a warm slice of polenta with mild white cheese.

As you can see, there are no measurements. This is typical of the recipes that actually exist for Nona's special foods.

Here is how I adapted it for the polenta picnic. This amount will serve 60 or so people. It is sublime made with veal, but the current price of veal is prohibitive, so we have, I think quite successfully adapted the recipe to use beef. I keep the cost as low as possible by doing my own "butchering". In pricing meat for this year's (2015) picnic, stewing beef (made from many kinds of meat, from steak to ribs) cost \$6.49 a pound and bottom round was \$5.99 a pound. I managed to find bottom round for \$3.99 a pound. There is some waste in trimming, so I probably netted around \$4.49 a pound for the stewing beef I cut – a saving of about \$2 per pound or around \$50, and it yields a uniform type of meat ideal for stewing.

I purchase about 25 pounds of bottom round roast when on sale and cut it into cubes for stewing. I trim any hard fat from the meat and any gristle or silvery tissue. I cut slices about 1 inch thick from the roast, then cut each slab into cubes about an inch square, trimming as I go. I do this as close to the cooking time as possible, because a lot of the juices bleed out if the meat is allowed to sit too long. This amount of meat will almost fill two Tupperware "fix-and-mix" bowls, which can be covered and refrigerated, if necessary until time to brown. I dredge the pieces lightly in all-purpose flour. Actually, I drain any juices off (keep and add to meat when cooking), dump some flour into the bowl and dredge it "in situ" and brown in melted butter and olive oil. The recipe above doesn't mention flour, but Sissie (who collected the recipe) makes it with flour as well, and it is the only agent for thickening that we use. I leave quite a lot of space between the pieces (about 13 pieces in a 13-inch frying pan) and turn to brown on all sides. As each panful is done, I put the solid contents into the cooking pan of my 22-quart Rival Roaster Oven. When all are browned, I add about four onions diced pretty small and four good-sized cloves of garlic minced, plus any remaining oil/butter mixture and bits to the "oven". If necessary to hold before starting the cooking process, this can be refrigerated until the desired time. Around 8 hours before mealtime, I add water to cover the meat and cook at the lowest temperature (can be started at a higher setting, then reduced when bubbling starts). Stir every half hour or so. After about four hours, I season to taste with salt and pepper ("quite a bit" of the latter, as noted above). Just before leaving home, I use a fat-separator pitcher to remove excess fat. When we arrive at the picnic site, I plug the "oven" back in, and add a small jug bottle of Carlo Rossi Paisano wine. Continue to stir every 20 minutes or so.

The butchering and browning and cutting up onions and garlic take probably five hours or more. I feel the preparation should be done by three or four people. In addition, transporting this is tricky. There is no way I could do it myself. It pretty much fills the roaster oven and is very hot! Dan Z was able to carry this down to the garage and put it in the back of my Outback. I placed two bath sheet-sized towels one forward of the oven and one aft. I live at the bottom of a steep hill, and there are several more hills on the route. When I arrived, some of the gravy had spilled and had NOT been absorbed by the towels. Probably four large towels would have worked better, but my Weathertech mats kept it in check. And what could be better than a car that smells a little like tonco!