

Cassoulet

ORIGINAL

Cassoulet is one of the most magnificent examples of French home cooking. The sumptuous casserole of beans and cured and roasted meats is not as refined as some of the fussier dishes of haute cuisine, but what it lacks in opulence it makes up for in rustic charm.

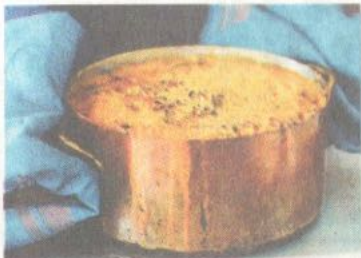


WHY MASTER IT?

WE MAY THINK OF IT as decadent, but cassoulet is at heart a humble bean and meat stew, rooted in the rural cooking of the Languedoc region. But for urban dwellers without access to the staples of a farm in southwest France — crocks of rendered lard and poultry fat, vats of duck confit, hunks of meat from just-butchered pigs and lambs — preparing one is an epic undertaking that stretches the cook. The reward, though, may well be the pinnacle of French home cooking.

Cassoulet does take time to make: There is overnight marinating and soaking, plus a long afternoon of roasting and simmering, and a few days on top of that if you make your own confit. However, it is also a relatively forgiving dish, one that welcomes variation and leaves room for the personality of the cook — perhaps more than any other recipe in the canon. As long as you have white beans slowly stewed with some combination of sausages, pork, lamb, duck or goose, you have a cassoulet.

The hardest part about making a cassoulet when you're not in southwest France is shopping for the ingredients. This isn't a dish to make on



A HUMBLE STEW AT ITS HEART.

the fly; you will need to plan ahead, ordering the duck fat and confit and the garlic sausage online or from a good butcher, and finding sources for salt pork and fresh, bone-in pork and lamb stew meat. The beans, though, aren't hard to procure. Great Northern and cannellini beans make fine substitutes for the Tarbais, flageolet and lingot beans used in France.

Then give yourself over to the rhythm of roasting, sautéing and long, slow simmering. The final stew, a glorious pot of velvety beans and chunks of tender meat covered by a burnished crust, is well worth the effort.

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GATHERING INGREDIENTS.

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ROASTING THE MEATS.

refrigerator. When ready to cook, wipe
the meat dry with paper towels, dis-
carding the garlic, pepper and herbs.
Place in a Dutch oven or baking dish
and cover completely with fat. (Duck
fat is traditional, but olive oil also
works.) Bake in a 200-degree oven
until the duck is tender and well-
browned, 3 to 4 hours. Let duck cool in
the fat before refrigerating. Duck
confit lasts for at least a month in the
refrigerator and tastes best after
sitting for 1 week.

■ Don't think the meat is the only star
of this dish. The beans need just as
much love. You want them velvety,
sitting in a trove of tomato, stock and
rich fat. Buy the best beans you can,
preferably ones that have been har-



PREPARING THE BEANS.

vested and dried within a year of
cooking. The variety of white bean is
less important than the freshness.

■ Bread crumbs aren't traditional for
cassoulet, but will result in a topping
with an especially airy and crisp tex-
ture. Regular dried bread crumbs,
either bought or homemade, will also
work. (If you like, you can skip the
bread crumbs entirely. The top will
brown on its own, but there won't be a
distinct crust.)

**Cooking the Parts
And Assembling the Dish**

■ When you roast the meat, leave
plenty of space between the chunks of
meat so they brown nicely. More
browning means richer flavor.



TRIMMING THE SALT PORK.

■ The bouquet garni flavors both the
beans and the bean liquid, which is
used to moisten the cassoulet as it
bakes. To make one, take sprigs of
parsley and thyme and a bay leaf and
tie them together with at least 1 foot of
kitchen string. Tuck the bay leaf in the
middle of the bouquet and make sure
you wrap the herbs thoroughly, sev-
eral times around.

■ Feel free to use a slow cooker or
pressure cooker for the beans. Add the
garlic sausage about halfway through
the cooking time. It doesn't have to be
exact, since the sausage is already
cooked; you're adding it to flavor the
beans and their liquid.

■ In this recipe, the beans are finished
in a tomato purée, which reduces and



LAYERING BEANS AND MEATS.

thickens the sauce of the final cas-
soulet. But you can substitute a good
homemade stock for the purée. You'll
get a souper cassoulet, but it's just as
traditional without the tomatoes.

■ The salt pork is layered in strips into
the bottom of the baking dish. As it
cooks, it crisps and turns into a bottom
crust for the stew. So it is important to
slice it thinly and carefully place it in a
single layer on the bottom of the dish
(and up the sides, if you have enough).
Don't overlap it very much, or those
parts won't get as crisp.

■ The reserved bean liquid is added to
the cassoulet for cooking, and its
starchiness is what keeps the stew
thick and creamy. Using stock instead
would make for a souper but still

delicious cassoulet.

■ You create a substantial top crust
with crunch by repeatedly cracking
the very thick layer of bread crumbs
as the cassoulet cooks, and by driz-
zling the topping generously and
evenly with bean liquid, which browns
and crisps up in the heat. It's best to
crack the topping in even little taps
from the side of a large spoon.

■ You don't have to make the cassoulet
all in one go. Break up the work by
cooking the separate parts ahead and
reserving them until you are ready to
layer and bake. Or assemble the cas-
soulet in its entirety ahead of time,
without bread crumbs, and then top
and bake just before serving.

TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

Shopping for Ingredients

■ You can use any kind of roasted meats for a cassoulet, and the kinds vary by region. Substitute roasted chicken, turkey or goose for the duck confit, bone-in beef for the lamb and bone-in veal for the pork. Lamb neck is a great substitute for the bone-in lamb stew meat, and you can use any chunks of bone-in pork in place of the pork stew meat. (The bones give the dish more flavor, and their gelatin helps thicken the final stew.)

■ Do not use smoked sausages in the beans, or substitute smoked bacon for the salt pork. The smoky flavor can overwhelm the dish, and it is not traditional in French cassoulets. If you can't find salt pork, pancetta will work in its place, and you won't need to poach it beforehand.

■ You can buy duck confit at gourmet markets or order it online. If you'd prefer to make it yourself, this is how to do it: Rub 4 fresh duck legs with a large pinch of salt each. Place in a dish and generously sprinkle with whole peppercorns, thyme sprigs and smashed, peeled garlic cloves. Cover and let cure for 4 to 24 hours in the



GATHERING INGREDIENTS.

refrigerator. When ready to cook, wipe the meat dry with paper towels, discarding the garlic, pepper and herbs. Place in a Dutch oven or baking dish and cover completely with fat. (Duck fat is traditional, but olive oil also works.) Bake in a 200-degree oven until the duck is tender and well browned, 3 to 4 hours. Let duck cool in the fat before refrigerating. Duck confit lasts for at least a month in the refrigerator and tastes best after sitting for 1 week.

■ Don't think the meat is the only star of this dish. The beans need just as much love. You want them velvety, sitting in a trove of tomato, stock and rich fat. Buy the best beans you can, preferably ones that have been har-



ROASTING THE MEATS.

vested and dried within a year of cooking. The variety of white bean is less important than the freshness.

■ Bread crumbs aren't traditional for cassoulet, but will result in a topping with an especially airy and crisp texture. Regular dried bread crumbs, either bought or homemade, will also work. (If you like, you can skip the bread crumbs entirely. The top will brown on its own, but there won't be a distinct crust.)

Cooking the Parts And Assembling the Dish

■ When you roast the meat, leave plenty of space between the chunks of meat so they brown nicely. More browning means richer flavor.



PREPARING THE BEANS.

■ The bouquet garni flavors both the beans and the bean liquid, which is used to moisten the cassoulet as it bakes. To make one, take sprigs of parsley and thyme and a bay leaf and tie them together with at least 1 foot of kitchen string. Tuck the bay leaf in the middle of the bouquet and make sure you wrap the herbs thoroughly, several times around.

■ Feel free to use a slow cooker or pressure cooker for the beans. Add the garlic sausage about halfway through the cooking time. It doesn't have to be exact, since the sausage is already cooked; you're adding it to flavor the beans and their liquid.

■ In this recipe, the beans are finished in a tomato purée, which reduces and



TRIMMING THE SALT PORK.

thickens the sauce of the final cassoulet. But you can substitute a good homemade stock for the purée. You'll get a soupier cassoulet, but it's just as traditional without the tomatoes.

■ The salt pork is layered in strips into the bottom of the baking dish. As it cooks, it crisps and turns into a bottom crust for the stew. So it is important to slice it thinly and carefully place it in a single layer on the bottom of the dish (and up the sides, if you have enough). Don't overlap it very much, or those parts won't get as crisp.

■ The reserved bean liquid is added to the cassoulet for cooking, and its starchiness is what keeps the stew thick and creamy. Using stock instead would make for a soupier but still



LAYERING BEANS AND MEATS.

delicious cassoulet.

■ You create a substantial top crust with crunch by repeatedly cracking the very thick layer of bread crumbs as the cassoulet cooks, and by drizzling the topping generously and evenly with bean liquid, which browns and crisps up in the heat. It's best to crack the topping in even little taps from the side of a large spoon.

■ You don't have to make the cassoulet all in one go. Break up the work by cooking the separate parts ahead and reserving them until you are ready to layer and bake. Or assemble the cassoulet in its entirety ahead of time, without bread crumbs, and then top and bake just before serving.

A BRIEF HISTORY

NAMED FOR THE CASSOLE, the earthenware pot in which it is cooked, cassoulet evolved over the centuries in the countryside of southwest France, changing with the ingredients on hand and the cooks stirring the pot.

Although there are as many cassoulets as there are kitchens in the Languedoc, three major towns of the region — Castelnaudary, Carcassonne and Toulouse — all vigorously lay claim to having created what they consider to be the only true cassoulet. It is a feud that has been going on at least since the middle of the 19th century, and probably even longer.

In 1938, the chef Prosper Montagné attempted to resolve the dispute. He approached the subject with religious zeal, likening the three competing versions to the Holy Trinity. The cassoulet from Castelnaudary, considered the oldest, is the Father in Montagné's trinity, and is made from a combination of beans, duck confit and pork (sausages, skin, knuckles, salt pork and roasted meat). The Carcassonne style is the Son, with mutton and the occasional partridge stirred in. The version from Toulouse, the Holy Spirit, was the first to add goose confit.

The recipe for cassoulet was codified by the "États Généraux de la Gastronomie" in 1966, and it was done in a way that allowed all three towns to keep their claims of authenticity.



GIFT OF MRS. PETER CHARDON BROOKS,
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

*"THE KITCHEN TABLE" BY
JEAN-SIMÉON CHARDIN (1699-1779).*

The organization mandated that to be called cassoulet, a stew must consist of at least 30 percent pork, mutton or preserved duck or goose (or a combination of the three), and 70 percent white beans and stock, fresh pork rinds, herbs and flavorings.

That settled the question of which meats to use. But there are two other points that still inspire debate: the use of tomatoes and other vegetables with the beans, and a topping of bread crumbs that crisp in the oven. "Larousse Gastronomique" gives some recipes that include the tomatoes, vegetables and bread crumbs, and some that do not. Julia Child chose to use them, as we do here.

Cassoulet

TIME: 5½ HOURS, PLUS MARINATING

YIELD: 12 SERVINGS

FOR THE MEAT:

- 2½ pounds bone-in pork stew meat, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 2½ pounds bone-in lamb stew meat, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 2½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 9 garlic cloves, peeled, plus 3 grated or minced garlic cloves
- ⅙ teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 bay leaf, torn into pieces
- 2 sprigs rosemary, torn into pieces
- 2 sprigs thyme, torn into pieces
- ½ cup/4 ounces duck fat, melted (or goose fat or lard, or a combination)

FOR THE BEANS:

- 1 pound dried Tarbais, flageolet, lingot, Great Northern or cannellini beans
- 3 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 bouquet garni (3 sprigs Italian parsley, 3 sprigs thyme and 1 bay leaf, tied with kitchen string; see Techniques)
- 1 stalk celery, halved
- 1 large carrot, halved
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 whole clove
- ½ white onion, cut stem to root end
- 8 ounces fully cooked French garlic sausage or kielbasa, skin removed and cut into chunks

FOR THE REST:

- 8 ounces salt pork
- ¼ cup duck fat (or goose fat, lard, a combination or olive oil), more as needed
- 1 pound fresh pork sausage, pricked all over with a fork
- 1½ large onions, diced
- 2 large carrots, diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 9 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 cups tomato purée, from fresh or canned tomatoes
- Kosher salt, to taste
- 4 legs duck confit, bought or homemade (see Techniques)
- 1½ cups panko, or other plain, dried bread crumbs

1. The night before cooking, marinate the meat and soak the beans. For meat: In a large bowl, combine all ingredients except fat and toss to combine. Cover and refrigerate overnight. For beans: In a large bowl, combine beans, 1 teaspoon salt and enough cold water to cover by 4 inches. Cover and let sit overnight.

2. The next day, roast the meat: Heat oven to 325 degrees. Pour fat over meat

another 1½ hours. Remove meat from baking sheet, then scrape up all browned bits stuck to the pan. Reserve fat and browned bits.

3. Meanwhile, cook the beans: Drain beans, add them to a large stockpot and cover with 2 inches water. Add bouquet garni, celery, carrot, 2 garlic cloves, 2 teaspoons salt and the pepper. Stick whole clove into the folds of the onion half and add that as well. Bring to a boil and then simmer over medium heat, stirring often, until beans are cooked through, 1 to 1½ hours, adding garlic sausage after 30 minutes. When beans are cooked, remove bouquet garni and aromatics, including vegetables. Reserving cooking liquid, drain the beans and sausage.

4. While beans are cooking, bring a medium pot of water to a boil and add salt pork. Simmer for 30 minutes, remove and let cool. Cut off skin, then slice pork into very thin pieces and reserve.

5. Heat a very large skillet over medium heat and add a drizzle of duck or other fat. Add fresh pork sausages and cook until well browned on all sides, about 20 minutes. Remove to a plate and reserve, leaving any sausage fat in skillet.

6. In same skillet over medium-high heat, add ¼ cup of the reserved fat and the browned bits from the roasted meat. Add diced onions, carrots and celery, and cook until softened, about 10 minutes. Add 9 whole garlic cloves and cook until fragrant, another 2 to 4 minutes. Add tomato purée, season with salt to taste, and simmer until thickened to a saucelike consistency, 5 to 10 minutes, if necessary. Add cooked beans and stir to combine. Remove from heat and reserve.

7. Assemble the cassoulet: Heat oven to 375 degrees. In a large Dutch oven, lay salt pork pieces in an even layer to cover the bottom of the pot. Add a scant third of the bean and garlic sausage mixture, spreading evenly. Top with half of the roasted meat pieces, 2 pork sausages and 2 duck legs. Add another scant third of the bean mixture, and top with remaining meat, sausages and duck legs. Top with remaining beans, spreading them to the edges and covering all meat. Pour reserved bean liquid along the edges of the pot, until liquid comes up to the top layer of beans but does not cover. Sprinkle bread crumbs on top and drizzle with ¼ cup duck fat.

8. Bake until crust is lightly browned, about 30 minutes. Use a large spoon to lightly crack the crust; the bean liquid will bubble up. Use the spoon to drizzle

- 2½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 9 garlic cloves, peeled, plus 3 grated or minced garlic cloves
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
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8. Bake until crust is lightly browned, about 30 minutes. Use a large spoon to lightly crack the crust; the bean liquid will bubble up. Use the spoon to drizzle the bean liquid all over the top of the crust. Return to oven and bake 1 hour more, cracking the crust and drizzling with the bean liquid every 20 minutes, until the crust is well browned and liquid is bubbling. (The total baking time should be 1½ hours.) Remove from oven and let cool slightly, then serve.

1. The night before cooking, marinate the meat and soak the beans. For meat: In a large bowl, combine all ingredients except fat and toss to combine. Cover and refrigerate overnight. For beans: In a large bowl, combine beans, 1 teaspoon salt and enough cold water to cover by 4 inches. Cover and let sit overnight.

2. The next day, roast the meat: Heat oven to 325 degrees. Pour fat over meat in the bowl and toss to coat. Spread meat in one even layer on a rimmed baking sheet, leaving space between each piece to encourage browning (use two pans if necessary). Top meat with any fat left in bowl. Roast until browned, about 1 hour, then turn pieces, cover with foil, and continue to roast until soft,