

Hash of Beef: A Portuguese Dish of the XVth Century

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The Objective

When I started looking for a recipe I looked for something within my skills yet different from recipes I had tried before. It was important to me that the recipe be Portuguese as a complement to my ongoing persona research. I was unable to find recipes for my timeperiod, which is the 13th century Portugal. Happily, Duke Cariadoc of the Bow includes translated recipes from a 15th century Portuguese cookbook in his Miscellany, which at least is the right place and culture if not timeperiod.

Meat was an important food staple of the Portuguese people (Marques: 17) and since I have not had much opportunity to prepare meat, especially beef, the Picadinho de Carne de Vaca (Beef Hash) recipe was an ideal choice.

On the Portuguese, Their Food, and The Table

Research regarding Portugal in the early medieval period (before the nation become a great sea power) written in English is very difficult to find. The best cultural history I have found so far is by Professor A.H. de Oliveira Marques, Daily life in Portugal in the late Middle Ages. The first chapter of this book, "The Table" discusses customs of the table, the kitchen, and gives recipes from a 16th c. Portuguese cookbook: 'A Treatise on Cooking' a 16th c. cookbook [Tratado de Cozinha, Seculo XVI (MS.I-E-33 da BN de Napoles) an unpublished dissertation edited by Maria Jose da Gama Lobo Salema, 1956.]. Rather than attempt to rewrite what is already written at a very general level, let me paraphrase the most interesting highlights of Portuguese table manners and culinary arts:

- The first known book of Portuguese culinary recipes dates from the 15th c. (16)
- There were two meals a day, dinner (10-11am) and supper (6-7pm). (16)
- Dinner was largest meal for the wealthy/noble with 3 courses, not including soups, side dishes, and desserts. (17)
- Beverages were limited. Wine or water was served with meals. (27)
- Cloth tablecloths and napkins set the table. (28)
- It was customary to wash ones hands before meals. Ewers, bowls, and napkins were provided to guests for this purpose. Sometimes the wash water was scented with rosewater. (29)
- On the table would be gold and/or silver utensils. (29)
- The food was brought in tureens or platters. The custom was to precede each dish, as well as the wine, with servants bearing torches under the leadership of an usher. (29)
- Round bread trenchers were used as plates in the Middle Ages. The bread was replaced by wooden plate called a talhador. Two people shared bread/plate or bowls for more liquid food. This was called "comer com alguém no prato" literally, "to eat with someone on the plate". (30)
- Spoons were used at table, but one's belt knife was the most common eating implement. (30/31)
- Formal seating arrangements were not established at tables of the nobility until the late 14th/early 15th century. (31)
- Leftovers given to the poor. (35)
- Royal banquets were a theatrical production in their own right with heralds and musicians and plays in addition to the food. (35)

The Recipe

I found the recipe in David Friedman and Elizabeth Cook's The Miscellany. The recipe was originally taken from Um Tratado Da Cozinha Portuguesa Do Seculo XV (A Text on Portuguese Cooking from the Fifteenth Century), translated by Jane L. Crowley with the assistance of a modern Portuguese text by Professor Antonio Gomes Filho. I am quoting the recipe directly from the Miscellany. The translated recipe comes first followed by the ingredients list and directions redacted by Duke Cariadoc (David Friedman). Regrettably, the original recipe in Portuguese is not included in the Miscellany.

Picadinho de Carne de Vaca: Beef Hash

Wash tender beef and chop fine. Next add cloves, saffron, pepper, ginger, minced green herbs, onion juice, vinegar and salt. Sauté it all in oil and let cook until water dries up. Serve on slices of bread.

2 lb beef
1/4 t cloves
20 threads saffron
1 t pepper
1 t ginger
4 t onion juice
2 T wine vinegar
3/4 t salt
2 T oil
6 slices bread

green herbs:
4 t green coriander
2 t mint
1/4 c parsley

Chop meat to a little coarser than hamburger, using a food processor; mix everything but oil. The herbs chosen are those mentioned commonly in other recipes in this cookbook. Heat oil over moderately high heat in a large frying pan and add beef; cook about 20 minutes, stirring constantly until water comes out of the meat, then occasionally until water dries up. We considered it done when it still looked moist but there was no longer standing liquid. Serve over bread or toast; also good on rice.

In the same cookbook (*Um Tratado Da Cozinha Portuguesa Do Seculo XV (A Text on Portuguese Cooking from the Fifteenth Century)*), the "Moorish Chicken" recipe is much the same style as the "Beef Hash":

Cut up a fat hen and cook on a mild flame, with 2 spoons of fat, some bacon slices, lots of coriander, a pinch of parsley, some mint leaves, salt, and a large onion. Cover and let it get golden brown, stirring once in a while. Then cover hen with water and let boil, and season with salt, vinegar, cloves, saffron, black pepper and ginger. When chicken is cooked, pour in 4 beaten yolks. Then take a deep dish, lined with slices of bread, and pour chicken on top.

In the *Daily Life in Portugal...*, the author gives a number of recipes which are from 'A Treatise on Cooking' a 16th c. cookbook [*Tratado de Cozinha, Seculo XVI (MS.I-E-33 da BN de Napoles)*] an unpublished dissertation edited by Maria Jose da Gama Lobo Salema, 1956.]. I find it interesting that these dishes are so similar. It appears to me that [meat]+[fresh herbs]+[spices] over bread is a standard national dish of the time. The meat product was dependent on location and time of year. The following three recipes give hints on ingredient choices for my redaction.

Recipe for minced, dry-cooked beef

Take a pulpy, boneless piece of beef and not an outside cut because it is very tough. Mince it well and add herbs (cut in the same way as for a salad) and finely chopped onion. In place of butter, add very good olive oil without any rancidity. Once sautéed, season the meat with vinegar (add no water since it was washed before being minced.) Then wash as before, since no more water will be added. After it begins to simmer, continue cooking until no liquid remains, or, if not done in this way (as you would an lamprey eel), it may instead be done by placing slices of bread under the meat to absorb the liquid. (Marques: 18)

Recipe for lamprey eel

Wash the eel in hot water and remove its entrails over a clean pan so as to catch the blood as it comes out; then roll the eel up in that same pan and add coriander, parsley and finely chopped onion. Add a little olive oil, cover with a wooden plate and place over heat. When it is well sautéed add a very small amount of water and vinegar, and sprinkle on cloves, pepper, saffron, and a little ginger. (Marques: 21)

Recipe for rabbit

After the rabbit has been roasted, sauté finely minced onion in butter; once sautéed, season the onion with vinegar and sprinkle in cloves, saffron, pepper, and ginger. Cut the rabbit into pieces and put it in with the spice and onion mixture to simmer briefly. Lay some slices of bread on a plate and top with the rabbit pieces. (Marques: 23)

My redaction (deconstructing the recipe)

"Wash tender beef and chop fine."

The recipe calls for "tender beef" which wasn't much of a clue. Being new to beef shopping, I asked my food experts for advice. Neither the Miscellany nor the Marques book discussed cuts of meat. I looked at diagrams of cuts of beef and consulted modern cookbooks on beef preparation. In the end, price was the deciding factor and I used chuck roast for the recipe.

"Next add cloves, saffron, pepper, ginger, minced green herbs, onion juice, vinegar and salt."

I had cloves, saffron, black pepper, ginger, and salt on hand. I assumed the recipe meant ground/powdered spices. For "minced green herbs" I followed the "Moorish Chicken" recipe in the same cookbook which calls for "lots of coriander, a pinch of parsley, some mint leaves". This is the same combination used in Duke Cariadoc's redaction. There is no discussion of how to make "onion juice" in the recipes of the cookbook. I followed the recipe in the Miscellany although Duke Cariadoc does not discuss how he came to this recipe:

To Make Onion Juice

Peel your onions, cut them in pieces (8 pieces for a very large onion), put them in a food processor and reduce them to mush (a blender would probably work too). Put the mush through a potato ricer. Put what you get by that process through a clean, wet dish towel. To do that, you pour the onion juice (with some mush that got through the ricer) into the middle of the towel, holding up the edges. When the really liquid part has gone through into the bowl underneath, you pull the edges together so that what is left is a ball of onion mush wrapped in a dish towel. Squeeze until the juice is out. You should get just over a cup of juice per pound of onion. My guess is that you could omit the ricer stage, but I have not tried it that way yet.

It seemed a shame to discard all the lovely onion pieces but I followed the recipe faithfully. There is no discussion of what type of vinegar to use. Since Portugal was famous for its rose wines (Marques: 27) I decided to use red wine vinegar in my redaction.

"Sauté it all in oil and let cook until water dries up."

Extra virgin olive oil was my choice for sautéing oil. Olive oil was a Portuguese export. (Marques: 8)

"Serve on slices of bread."

Choosing bread was more difficult than I anticipated. Marques says, "bread of the highest quality was of wheat. [...] The bread was baked in large loaves, which were generally of a circular shape and which rose very little. [...] Price lists from the fifteenth century indicate that the loaves of bread normally eaten weighed from 150 to 750 grams (1/3 to 1 2/3 pounds)". (26, 27)

This wasn't terribly helpful in deciding whether to buy modern "white" or "wheat" since both are made with wheat flour. Elizabeth David's *English bread and yeast cookery* (London: Penguin Books, 1977) is acknowledged to be the best discussion of historical bread, but it was not helpful for Portugal or Spain.

Making bread was not a viable option, so I chose a modern "rustic" white loaf as an approximation of what an upper-class/noble family would have eaten.

The Preparation

Wash tender beef and chop fine. Next add cloves, saffron, pepper, ginger, minced green herbs, onion juice, vinegar and salt. Sauté it all in oil and let cook until water dries up. Serve on slices of bread.

Not being familiar with beef processing I have no idea why they needed to wash their beef in period. As the beef I purchased was straight from the grocery store, I didn't see then need for washing. I fine cubed it with a knife. In the test batch I cut approximately one centimeter squares and they were too large and fell off the bread. I used pre-ground cloves, black pepper, ginger, and salt. I left the saffron in strands and prepared the onion juice according to Duke Cariadoc's instructions.

I use a food processor to grind the herbs. I mixed the beef and the herbs, spices, and vinegar in a large mixing bowl and decided the meat was not finely ground enough, so put the entire mixture in the food processor and gave it a few pulses. I then let it marinate overnight.

In a Dutch oven I heated the olive oil, then added the beef mixture and stirred until all the pieces were browned. This process created more water than expected. I turned the heat down and let the mixture sauté, stirring occasionally. The test batch was a little dry as I let the water cook off too much. The recipe does not create its own gravy like some meat recipes do but the meat does develop a nice coating from the herb and spices. I attempted to not repeat this dryness in the event batch.

I used Duke Cariadoc's redaction as a guideline for quantities but did not follow his measurements exactly. I prefer the "until it be enow" school of measuring. In the test batch of the recipe I went a bit overboard on the cloves. I used more green herbs and more ginger in the preparation of the Picadinho I made for the day of the event.

My redaction

1.5 lb beef (chuck roast)
3 T onion juice
1 small bunch fresh green coriander (minced)
20 leaves fresh mint (minced)
top ½ of small bunch of fresh flat leaf parsley (minced)
1/4 t cloves
20 threads saffron
1/2 t pepper
2 t ginger
5 T wine vinegar
1/4 t salt
2 T oil
sliced white rustic bread

Chop meat very fine. Chop fresh herbs finely using a food processor; mix everything but oil. Heat oil over medium high heat in a Dutch oven and add beef mixture; cook about 20 minutes, stirring constantly until water comes out of the meat, then occasionally until water dries up. Done when there is no more standing liquid. Serve over bread.

Conclusion

The Portuguese culture is an under-researched area with the cultures of the Society. By presenting a glimpse into their food, I hope to spark an interest in the arts and sciences of the Iberian peninsula throughout our timeperiod.

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