

Red Cooking

Further north in China, where the weather is colder, cooks use a style of cooking that we know as braising, but they call it **red cooking**. What makes this style distinctive is that it uses soy, sherry, ginger, and even star anise to create the braising liquid. This liquid has so much flavor and is considered so valuable that it's often saved and reused after meat has been braised in it. The liquid is reinforced with new spices, but it carries the flavor of the previous braise with it.

Red-Cooked Beef and Turnips

Ingredients

Yield: 3–4 portions

Beef and vegetables:

- 3 Tbs oil
- 2 cloves garlic, lightly crushed
- 1 lb short ribs, cut in pieces
- 2 cups boiling water
- ½ lb icicle turnips, peeled and roll cut
- ½ carrot, peeled and roll cut
- ½ tsp salt

Seasonings:

- 2 Tbs dry sherry
- 4 Tbs dark soy sauce
- 2 tsp sugar
- 1 star anise
- 1 medium scallion, cut into four pieces
- 2 quarter-sized slices peeled ginger



The preparation for red-cooked beef begins with cutting the short ribs into smaller pieces. Cut between the bones, but be sure to leave the bones in because they add a tremendous amount of flavor. Brown the ribs in a pan with a little oil, turning to color all sides. This step should take about 5 minutes. Next, add the scallion, star anise, ginger, and garlic to the pan.

You may sometimes find recipes for red cooking that include a broad array of spices, from fennel seed to cinnamon, star anise, and even cloves. Almost always, whole spices are used so that they can be removed and replaced when they've outlived their usefulness. Using whole spices also guarantees that the flavor is gentle and round, rather than the aggressive flavor that may result from using ground spices.

The liquid for red cooking is either Chinese rice wine or a combination of dry sherry and soy sauce (not so much that the liquid becomes overly salty) and water. Cooking the meat and bones in this liquid yields a delicious broth. Add the liquid to the pan with the ribs and spices, bring it up to a simmer, cover it, and cook it either on top of the stove or in an oven at 325°.

Short ribs cut into 2-inch pieces will take about 1 ½ hours to cook. In the last 30 minutes of cooking time, add the carrots and turnips. Carrots lend some sweetness to the dish, while turnips are slightly bitter. Turnips are also thirsty; they will absorb the flavor of the braised meat.

You can also add some dried mushrooms, such as shiitake mushrooms. Dried mushrooms have much more savory flavor than fresh mushrooms do. Soak the



dried shiitakes in water until they are rehydrated. Remove the stems, which are quite hard, and cut the mushrooms into halves or thirds. Add some of the soaking liquid to the braise.

Continue cooking the short ribs and vegetables until both are tender. Before serving, baste the short ribs with some of the braising liquid. Note that this liquid is not thickened the way braises are in our culinary tradition. Serve the ribs and vegetables with rice.

A long-simmered dish like this one is the perfect venue for whole spices, because they give up their flavor over long cooking times.