

Tagine Technique

It would perhaps surprise you to know that a Moroccan tagine, Croatian peka and Hungarian kettle goulash have something in common. These seemingly diverse dishes all involve the same technique of cooking meat and onions in oil very slowly, with little or no added liquid, at least not until the meat and onions have progressed towards tenderness. The meat and onions in these dishes are cooked essentially in their own juices, the onions reducing to become part of the sauce and the liquid added later is to adjust the consistency and add extra layers of flavour. For a peka that liquid/flavour addition may be white wine and herbs, for a tagine it is often saffron infused water and honey. For a goulash it is water but variously also red wine vinegar and a little tomato paste. In fact Hungarian shepherds would cook the goulash to a very dry paste for travel and reconstitute it with water into a paprika laden soup or a stew; an early form of a packet soup. There is a tendency to adapt traditional slow cooked dishes to our quicker modes of cooking and notions of what makes a sauce or gravy. To that end lots of recipes add tinned tomatoes, lots of water or wine and let everything bubble away in a lot of liquid. It may well turn out to be a fine stew but textures and flavour stray from the original concept of slowly sweating meat and onions.

This brings me back to cooking a tagine in the very vessel that gives the dish its name. The ceramic dish with its tall conical lid is superbly designed to cook meat in its own juices. As the meat and onions cook, the moisture given off is constantly condensing off the conical lid back down into the stewing meat, keeping it moist. Importantly, the tagine base is quite a shallow dish, so there is no room for lots of liquid. What also sets this traditional Moroccan cooking apart from Western styles of braising is that it does not require meat to be browned thoroughly. Most Western adapted recipes

seem to do this, even browning the meat in a separate frypan and often not using the tagine at all, except for presentation purposes. As the onion cooks down, the meat will develop colour. It just takes time.

Tagine cooking is a matter of layering the components as the cooking continues. Starting with a really good cover of olive oil on the bottom. Spread a layer of chopped onions over the base and then add the meat which has been marinated in the spices. After about 40 minutes of cooking, the saffron infused water is added and a layer of sliced onions that will make up part of the vegetable or fruit component (e.g., pumpkin, carrot, quince, pears, eggplant, peppers, zucchini) is also layered on at this stage. The denser vegetables like potatoes are added first with softer vegetables or fruit last. One or more hours later a garnish of separately cooked dried fruit and toasted nuts is sprinkled on top. Herbs, like coriander, parsley or mint can be strewn on top at the table. A tagine is quite a dense combination of meat and concentrated gravy with infused vegetables and sweet fruit elements; a result of time and layers of flavour. So, if you have a cooking tagine put it directly on the gas stove, cook in it and present it to the table to spectacular effect.

Here is a recipe for a goat tagine, using shoulder meat cut off the bone. Choose the combinations of vegetables and fruit you prefer to build layers of flavour.

- 1 kg goat shoulder, boned and cut into large pieces
- 1/2 tbs ras-al-hanout spice mix
- 1/2 tbs ground ginger
- 1/2 tbs ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp pepper
- 1 tsp salt
- pinch cayenne pepper (optional)
- large pinch saffron
- 1 tbs honey(optional)
- 1 cinnamon stick

- olive oil
- one large onion, diced
- 2 potatoes cut into quarters
- green and red peppers, sliced
- small Lebanese eggplant cut into quarters
- purple onion, sliced
- 1 cup dried sour cherries
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp sugar
- handful of blanched almonds, toasted until golden
- fresh parsley leaves for garnish

Mix the spices, meat and potatoes together with a little olive oil and massage well into the meat. Marinate for several hours or overnight in the fridge.

Heat the tagine on the stove. Cover the base with olive oil and fry the chopped onions. Cover the tagine and let the onions soften. Add the marinated meat, cover and cook for 20 minutes. Stir the meat and onions to brown all sides. Grind the pinch of saffron in a mortar and pestle and add a little boiling water to disperse it. Add the saffron in about 100 ml of water to the tagine. If using honey you can add it at this stage but add a good grinding of black pepper to counter the sweetness. Add a stick of cinnamon. Stir and cook over low heat for another 20 minutes. Add the vegetables and cover and cook slowly for another hour or so. Add a dash of water from the kettle if required but keep liquid levels low to maintain a thick concentrated gravy. In the meantime dissolve the sugar in enough water to cover the dried cherries. Add the ground cinnamon and cook in a small saucepan until the liquid is reduced and the cherries swollen. Add these to the tagine along with the almonds towards the end of cooking. Garnish with fresh herbs. Serve with flat bread, couscous or bulgar wheat salad.

I obtained goat meat from Lakey Farm, Sunbury which is available at Melbourne Farmers Markets. Goat is also available

from John Cester, Prahran market and Queen Victoria Market.