

PORK STEW WITH FENNEL AND BUTTERNUT SQUASH

Cheap Eats, Two-for-One, Family Meal, Rewarms Well, Freezes Well, Heirloom Pork
Serves 4, with leftovers

Nothing suggests that colder days are ahead more than the appearance of winter squash. There are many varieties, but I keep coming back to butternut squash as my favorite. Readily available, it keeps well for months, has a deep, sweet flavor, and holds its shape well when stewed. Combined with pork, fresh fennel, and tomato, it produces a stew that is much greater than the sum of its parts. I like to cut the pork into big chunks; they hold their shape and are much more appealing than little cubes.

Aromatic Spice Rub

2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon dried rubbed sage
¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1 teaspoon fennel pollen or ground fennel seeds

3 pounds boneless Boston butt, trimmed of external fat and cut into 3-inch chunks
¼ pound pancetta, diced into ¼-inch cubes
2 cups chopped onions
2 tablespoons chopped garlic
2 cups homemade pork stock or canned low-sodium chicken broth
1 cup dry red wine
2 cups peeled, seeded, and diced tomatoes (fresh or canned)
2 large fennel bulbs, fronds chopped, stalks discarded, bulbs cut into 1-inch chunks
3 cups 1½-inch cubes peeled butternut squash
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 Rub: Combine all the ingredients in a small bowl. Rub all over the pork chunks. Set aside for 1 hour, or cover and refrigerate overnight.

2 Preheat the oven to 350°F.

3 Heat a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the pancetta and cook until it is browned and the fat has rendered, about 5 minutes. Remove the pancetta with a slotted spoon and set aside, leaving about 3 tablespoons fat in the pot. Increase the heat to medium-high, add the pork, and brown on all sides, 7 to 10 minutes. Remove the pork with a slotted spoon and set aside. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the fat.

4 Add the onions and garlic and cook, stirring, until soft, about 5 minutes. Add the stock, red wine, and tomatoes and bring to a boil, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot. Add the pancetta and pork.

5 Cover and bake for 1 hour.

6 Remove the pot from the oven and add the fennel fronds and bulbs and squash. Bake, covered, for 30 minutes more, or until the meat and vegetables are quite tender. Remove from the oven and, with a slotted spoon, remove the meat and vegetables to a warm platter or serving bowl. Degrease the surface of the sauce, and if the sauce is thin, bring to a boil and reduce it until it begins to thicken and become syrupy. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add the meat and vegetables and heat through, then return to the platter and serve at once.

Alternative Cuts: Boneless country-style ribs, blade steaks, shoulder steaks, pork cheeks, or neck bones. Or shanks, cut into 2-inch-thick rounds. Cheeks, neck bones, and shanks will require longer cooking times.

Cook's Note

- For a deeper, more intense porky flavor, try this stew with meat from heirloom breeds, such as Berkshire, Tamworth, or Duroc. Using the homemade pork stock will also provide more flavor.

Leftovers

- Serve leftover stew over large pasta shapes such as farfalle, rotini, or rigatoni, and make sure to provide Parmigiano-Reggiano to sprinkle over the top.
- If you have lots of stew left over, make a delicious pie by covering the stew with your favorite corn bread. You can also make a great topping with biscuits.