

COLD COMFORT – Hearty Meals for Wintery Evenings

By Cathleen Calkins

When the mercury settles into the 30's and winds wrap wispy arms around cabin eaves, old-fashioned aspirations come to mind. In the depths of winter, days are shorter and body and soul seek solace from the cold. After a day on mountain slopes or snowshoeing into pine-treed canyons, cooking in unhurried style of days past is a terrific way to transition into a chilly winter evening. Colder weather dictates comfort and deliciously hearty stews, rich simmered soups and tender braises are often the best tonics.

When contemplating ingredients for soups, stews and braises, winter-style vegetables offer unique textures and flavors. By definition these are varieties that never flinch at the arrival of fall frosts and can resist a moderate amount of chilly temperatures. There is something old-fashioned about these vegetables - their earthier essence conjures up images of winter evenings spent in front of a wood fire with a bowl of warm liquid cupped in your hands.

Stews and braises traditionally rely on root vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, and onions. Beyond these, try experimenting with sweet potatoes, parsnips, or celery root. Professional chef and author, Devin Alexander, says, "These are great additives to stews, soups and even mashed potatoes." Try simmering these together with others to make a satisfying meal.

Certain spices and herbs work well when it comes to seasoning. Cumin, typically associated with Mexican-style dishes, adds intensity to meat stews. Thyme, often paired with tomatoes, imparts a slight mint flavor. Rosemary has a subtle aroma and enlivens root vegetables. Majoram, a herb that doesn't overpower, blends well with other and offers a sweet, delicate flavor.

Thinking of something more traditional than a soup or stew? Braising is a excellent alternative and a wonderful way to turn tougher cuts of meat into tender entrees. Relying on heat, moisture, and time, braising co-mingles flavors of meat with cooking liquids. Consider using braises that incorporate tomatoes or wine - their acidic nature makes for 'fork-tender' end results.

If you are looking to reduce fat in your diet, leaner cuts of meat work amazingly well when slow cooked. Spice up traditional chili recipes by replacing beef with ground turkey. You'll keep the flavor and cut the fat. Chef Devin Alexander comments, "I always use the leanest cuts of meat and don't see any reason not to." Alexander favors top round steak, top loin of pork and pork tenderloin. "When cooked right, they're so tender, you'd think they were a much fattier cut of meat."

Compliment your meal with hand-rolled bread, beans or wild rice. The imperfection of hand rolled breads offers an old-world touch to a savory winter meal. Wild rice and beans lend texture and distinctive flavors. Take advantage of winter's nights and sample the recipes below. You'll be rewarded with fine cold-weather fare and a memorable meal.

Mom's New Beef Stew

Chef Devin Alexander has shared her secrets for unbelievably decadent, yet healthy foods in guest appearances on Good Morning America, The View, Discovery Health, USA, and Style Network, among others. Her recent work, The Biggest Loser Cookbook, is a NY Times bestseller. www.DevinAlexander.com.

1 tablespoon whole-grain oat flour
1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
1/8 teaspoon salt
Pinch of ground pepper
1 pound top round steak, cut into 1" cubes
2 teaspoons olive oil
8 ounces mushrooms, halved
1 onion, chopped
1 tablespoon garlic, minced
1 teaspoon dried thyme
2 cans (14 ounces each) low-sodium, fat-free beef broth
2 large carrots, cut into bite-size pieces
1 pound sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1" cubes

In a medium re-sealable plastic bag, combine the flour, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Add the beef and shake the bag until all the cubes are coated. Refrigerate for at least 15 minutes. Over medium-high heat add oil and beef cubes to the pot in a single layer. Cook for 1 minute or until browned. Reduce heat and add mushrooms, onion, garlic, and thyme. Cook, stirring occasionally for about 10 minutes, or until the onion is tender. Add the broth and carrots, and bring broth to boil. Reduce to simmer, cover and cook for 45 minutes. Add potatoes and cook for an additional 45 minutes, or until the beef is fork tender. Salt and pepper to taste and serve immediately.

Simmered Southwest Chicken

Scott Corder, a professional ski patroller, likes to return home to this simple meal after a day on the slopes.

8 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
1 Green Bell Pepper
Vegetable oil
½ cup onion, chopped
2 cloves of garlic, minced
1 can mild green Chile peppers
2 cups tomatoes, diced
2 small jalapeno peppers, chopped
1 teaspoon dried oregano
¼ teaspoon cumin

Brown chicken breasts in skillet using vegetable oil and remove. In same skillet, sauté onion, green bell pepper, Chile peppers, garlic and jalapeno peppers. Add chicken, onion mixture and remainder of ingredients to a crock pot, stir to combine and cover. Set crock

pot to low and cook for 6 to 8 hours.

Scott's Herb Bread

1 ¼ cups warm water
3 cups bread flour
2 tablespoons dry milk powder
2 tablespoons sugar
1 ½ teaspoons salt
2 tablespoons butter, softened
3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
1 ½ teaspoons dried marjoram
1 ½ teaspoons dried thyme
1 teaspoon dried basil
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon active dry yeast
Olive Oil

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Mix ingredients thoroughly, knead and form into a ball. Place in a large bowl, cover and set aside for 20 minutes. Knead again and allow dough to rise until it doubles in size. Hand roll dough into desired shape and place on large greased cookie sheet. Brush with olive oil and bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until golden brown.

Charquican (Chilean Beef Stew)

Fiction writer Rachel Pinto recalls spending family holidays in the mountains. Her Chilean mother and Portuguese father would take turns cooking stews rich with the flavors of their native countries.

3 medium potatoes, diced
3 carrots, sliced
1 cup pumpkin, diced
1 cup squash, diced
10 ounces each fresh green beans, corn kernels and peas
1 green or red pepper, chopped
2 Italian squash, sliced
2 cups beef stock
2 pounds lean ground beef
Pinch each of oregano, cilantro, parsley and cumin
1 medium onion, chopped
2-3 cloves of garlic, chopped
Salt and pepper
1 teaspoon of paprika
2 tablespoons of olive oil

Combine all vegetables in large pot and simmer in beef stock for 25 minutes or until fully cooked. Sauté beef until brown. Add vegetable mixture and simmer for 5 minutes. Salt and pepper to taste and serve topped with chopped parsley.

Portuguese Kale Soup

2 teaspoons crushed red pepper
2 teaspoons salt
1 pound linguica (Portuguese mild sausage)
1 medium onion, chopped
2 bunches of kale
6 potatoes, diced
1 head cabbage, shredded
3 cans kidney beans, drained

Combine linguica/sausage red pepper, onion and salt in medium-sized pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 30 minutes. Add kale, cabbage and beans and cook for 15 minutes. Add potatoes and cook for 30 minutes more. Season to taste and serve.