



Slow Cooker Red Wine–Braised Short Ribs



Do a little upfront kitchen work. Walk away. Eight hours later, enjoy short ribs that are long on flavor.

SHORT RIBS ARE a tough cut of meat that requires a long, slow braise to achieve melting, fork-tender perfection. Recipes for wine-braised ribs have you brown the meat to render some of the fat, and then sauté onions, carrots, and celery in the pot. Next, you stir in tomato paste, red wine, and broth (scraping up the flavorful browned bits known as fond) before returning the ribs to the pot to simmer. Given the usual three-hour cooking time, it's no surprise that most slow-cooker cookbooks include a recipe.

What did surprise me was that none I tested was much good: In general, the ribs, though tender, tasted boiled and drab, and the sauce was watery and dotted with fat. The closed, moist environment of a slow cooker allows no evaporation, so the flavors couldn't become concentrated and deepened. Clearly, I'd have to work on developing flavor before the ingredients entered slow-cooker lockdown. I put together a basic sauce (figuring I'd refine it later), then turned to the meat.

In the test kitchen, we use English-style ribs for braises. Their single bone and thick layer of meat make for hefty, uniform portions. I knew browning the ribs in a skillet first was key. But the ribs' curved bones prevented the meat from lying flat in the pan, in turn preventing the full

development of fond—and thus flavor (I'd need all the flavor I could get in the slow cooker). Since I'd be removing the meat from the bone before serving the short ribs anyway, I sliced it off the bone upfront, trimming some fat at the same time. This allowed for more browning, and more fond development, than with bone-in ribs.

I tossed the raw bones into the slow cooker with the browned meat, but they added surprisingly little flavor. I cooked

STEP-BY-STEP Fifteen Minutes to Unlocking Beefy Flavor

Separating the meat from the bones—and “roasting” the bones in a surprising way—yields the most flavorful dish.



1. Insert a knife between the rib and meat and, staying as close to the bone as possible, saw the meat off the bone.

The slow cooker yielded tender, fall-off-the-bone rib meat. Too bad about the (lack of) flavor.

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them in the skillet first to enhance their taste, but that pesky curve inhibited proper browning, so they made a lackluster statement. Roasting the bones (as restaurant chefs do when making stock) took too much time. Wondering if I could “roast” the bones in the microwave, I laid them in a baking dish and hit start. After about 15 minutes, the bones looked like they'd spent hours in an oven, and indeed, they added unequivocal depth to the sauce.

Although the sauce was flavorful, it lacked enough acid to balance the rich, fatty beef. I doubled the red wine from 1 cup to 2 cups—with scant effect. Next, I reduced the 2 cups back to 1 cup on the stovetop to concentrate the flavors and found that this gave the sauce real muscle. Two tablespoons of balsamic vinegar added a subtle sweetness that pulled the dish together.

For a glossy, velvety consistency, I rejected cornstarch (gluey) and flour (starchy) in favor of instant tapioca, which I added with the broth. Only one problem remained: Short ribs ooze fat as they cook. To remedy this, many recipes chill them overnight so that the gelled fat can be scraped from the cooking liquid and discarded. I didn't want to add a day to my cooking, so I simply fished out the ribs and set them aside, discarded the bones, strained the sauce, and then reached for the fat separator—an easy fix. At last my sauce had sheen, body, and layers of flavor.

SLOW-COOKER RED WINE–BRAISED SHORT RIBS Serves 4

For this recipe, we prefer English-style ribs, each of which contains a single, large rib bone and a thick piece of meat, rather than thinner, flanken-style ribs.

- 5 pounds beef short ribs (6 to 8 English-style ribs), trimmed of excess fat (see note)
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped
- 1 celery rib, chopped
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 cups red wine
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons Minute tapioca
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1. MICROWAVE BONES Following photo 1, cut meat from bones and set aside. Arrange bones in 13- by 9-inch baking dish and microwave until well browned, 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer to slow cooker.

2. BROWN MEAT Pat meat dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook meat until well browned, about 5 minutes per side. Transfer to slow cooker.

3. COOK AROMATICS Cook onions, carrot, and celery in now-empty skillet over medium heat until browned, about 8 minutes. Stir in tomato paste and thyme and cook until beginning to brown, about 1 minute. Stir in wine and vinegar and simmer, scraping up any browned bits, until reduced to 1 cup, about 5 minutes. Stir in broth, tapioca, and bay leaves and return to boil. Transfer to slow cooker.

4. BRAISE AND FINISH Cover slow cooker and cook on low until meat is fork-tender, about 8 hours (or cook on high for 4 to 5 hours). Transfer meat to serving platter. Strain and defat cooking liquid and discard solids. Stir parsley into sauce and season with salt and pepper. Pour 1 cup sauce over meat. Serve, passing remaining sauce at table.



2. Microwave the bones for 10 to 15 minutes and add them to the slow cooker to add rich, roasted flavor.