In culinary terms 'stewing can best be described as slowly cooking food in its own juices with the aid of a minimum amount of moistening agent in the form of stock, wine, beer, sauce, butter etc. During cooking the liquid is flavoured by extracts from the stewed food, the result is a highly flavoured liquor or sauce which forms an integral part of the stew. Throughout this process, which is generally a lengthy one, evaporation is kept to a minimum by covering the stewing vessel with a tight fitting lid and simmering the stew on top of the stove or in the oven. Condensation, which continually forms on the inside of the lid, acts as a self basting process keeping the food moist. If the rate of evaporation is not kept to a minimum the stew will become dry and could burn. Therefore it may be necessary to add additional liquid as needed throughout the cooking period. Once cooked the liquid and food are usually served together to form the complete dish. Tougher cuts of meat may be made tender and palatable by this method. Foods for stewing are cut into small pieces or cuts before cooking and may comprise of meats, fish, vegetables and fruit. The flavour and colour of stock used will be determined on the type of meat to be cooked and the colour required of the finished dish, e.g. brown beef stew using brown beef stock. When a brown colour is required the meat and vegetables are sealed and browned in oil/dripping at a high temperature to ensure correct colour and sealing of the meat. Colour is also achieved by browning the roux and by using a brown stock. If a white coloured product is required less heat is applied to seal gently and without browning. The most suitable mediums for this process are butter and margarine. Where a roux is required it is cooked to the blond stage before being moistened with stock to effect a white colour. In some instances meats used for white stews are blanched and refreshed as a means of sealing the meat and also extracting the scum, which would otherwise discolour the resultant sauce.

Throughout cooking, items need to be checked periodically to ensure that stock levels are maintained and that food is not adhering to the base of the cooking vessel as this could result in a burnt stew. Over cooking results in unpalatable meat which breaks up, becomes stringy in texture and difficult to handle.

On completion of cooking the flavoursome liquor is adjusted for consistency. This is achieved by one of the following:

Reducing the sauce

Whisking in beurre manié, arrowroot or cornflour, and reboiling to cook the starch and effect thickening

Adding demi-glace, Jus lie or veloute sauce as required by the dish in question.

Stewing meats is an economical method of cooking as it allows for the use of less expensive cuts of meat.