



Cuban Braised Shredded Beef (Ropa Vieja)

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 16: Dinner in Cuba

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

Traditional *ropa vieja* recipes require making a beef stock and then using the meat and some of the liquid to make a separate sauté with onion and pepper slices and spices. To simplify, we combined the two cooking methods into the ease of braising in a Dutch oven, which also meant that all of the beef's juices ended up in the final dish. We eschewed traditional flank steak in favor of brisket, which contains the right mix of beefy flavor and collagen to guarantee just-tender, flavorful juicy shreds. We cut the brisket ahead of time into 2-inch-wide strips to speed cooking and make shredding a breeze. To mimic the meatiness that commonly comes from an MSG-spiked seasoning blend, we chose to sear the meat before braising, and we added two glutamate-rich anchovies to the mix. We found that slowly caramelizing the onion and pepper strips mimicked the deep flavor of a traditional *sofrito* without requiring an extra step. The final addition of briny chopped green olives and a splash of white vinegar brings all the flavors into sharp focus.

Serves 6 to 8

Look for a brisket that is 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 inches thick. Serve with steamed white rice and beans. Another good accompaniment is our recipe for Fried Sweet Plantains (see related content).

INGREDIENTS

- 1** (2-pound) beef brisket, fat trimmed to 1/4 inch
- Salt and pepper
- 5** tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2** onions, halved and sliced thin
- 2** red bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and sliced into 1/4-inch-wide strips
- 2** anchovy fillets, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- 4** garlic cloves, minced
- 2** teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 1/2** teaspoons dried oregano
- 1/2** cup dry white wine
- 2** cups chicken broth
- 1** (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2** bay leaves
- 3/4** cup pitted green olives, chopped coarse
- 3/4** teaspoon white wine vinegar, plus extra for seasoning

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Cut brisket against grain into 2-inch-wide strips. Cut any strips longer than 5 inches in half crosswise. Season beef on all sides with salt and pepper. Heat 4 tablespoons oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until just smoking. Brown beef on all sides, 7 to 10 minutes; transfer to large plate and set aside. Add onions and bell peppers and cook until softened and pan bottom develops fond, 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer vegetables to bowl and set aside. Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil to now-empty pot, then add anchovies, garlic, cumin, and oregano and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in wine, scraping up any browned bits, and cook until mostly evaporated, about 1 minute. Stir in broth, tomato sauce, and bay leaves. Return beef and any accumulated juices to pot and bring to simmer over high heat. Transfer to oven and cook, covered, until beef is just tender, 2 to 2 1/4 hours, flipping meat halfway through cooking.

2. Transfer beef to cutting board. Remove and discard bay leaves. When beef is cool enough to handle, shred into 1/4-inch-thick pieces. Meanwhile, add olives and reserved vegetables to pot and bring to boil over medium-high heat; simmer until thickened and measures 4 cups, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in beef. Add vinegar. Season with salt, pepper, and extra vinegar to taste; serve.

TECHNIQUE

FOR PERFECT SHREDS, PICK THE RIGHT CUT—AND CUT IT RIGHT

Our favorite cuts of beef for braising, chuck roast and short ribs, are tender and full of collagen that keeps the meat juicy during cooking, but their muscle fibers are relatively thin. This isn't a problem in most recipes, where ultratender meat is the goal, but in *ropa vieja*, where we want more substantial shreds of beef, we turned to a cut with thicker fibers: brisket.

Before cooking, we cut the brisket against the grain into 2-inch-wide strips. This shortens the muscle fibers, making the meat easier to shred with the grain (we use two forks to make quick work of the job) after cooking. It also helps the meat cook faster.



TECHNIQUE

BEEFING UP THE SOFRITO

Most versions of *ropa vieja* get their depth from a combination of a *sofrito*, the Latin flavor foundation created when you sauté aromatic vegetables until a rich fond forms on the bottom of the pot, and a salty seasoning mix called Sazón. We skipped the mix and instead made an ultrasavory fond by first searing the brisket pieces—an untraditional step—and then sautéing the peppers and onions on top of the beef fond to create even more flavorful browned bits that give the pot a meaty boost.

A SHORTCUT NOT TAKEN: Latin cooks boost meaty flavor with Sazón, but we use other methods.

