



Rigatoni with Beef and Onion Ragu

From *America's Test Kitchen* Season 15: Pasta Rustica

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

This simple 16th century ragu of slow-cooked onions and beef is deeply flavored and comforting, but we had to tweak it slightly to make it work in a modern context. Originally, the recipe made two meals or courses: a rich, savory sauce for pasta and a dish of cooked beef. In our version we shred the meat and add it back to the sauce for one substantial meal. To eliminate the need for intermittent stirring and monitoring during cooking, we move the action from the stovetop to the oven. We add tomato paste for color and to boost the flavor, and we make sure to keep the mixture wet enough to extract maximum flavor from the onions. To encourage the formation of a sauce that clings to the pasta, we vigorously stir them together, so that the starch from the pasta adds body to the sauce.

Serves 6 to 8

If marjoram is unavailable, substitute an equal amount of oregano. Pair this dish with a lightly dressed salad of assertively flavored greens.

INGREDIENTS

- 1** (1- to 1 1/4-pound) boneless beef chuck-eye roast, cut into 4 pieces and trimmed of large pieces of fat
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2** ounces pancetta, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 2** ounces salami, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1** small carrot, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1** small celery rib, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 2 1/2** pounds onions, halved and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2** tablespoons tomato paste
- 1** cup dry white wine
- 2** tablespoons minced fresh marjoram
- 1** pound rigatoni
- 1** ounce Pecorino Romano cheese, grated (1/2 cup), plus extra for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1.** Sprinkle beef with 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper and set aside. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees.
- 2.** Process pancetta and salami in food processor until ground to paste, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add carrot and celery and process 30 seconds longer, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Transfer paste to Dutch oven and set aside; do not clean out processor bowl. Pulse onions in processor in 2 batches, until 1/8- to 1/4-inch pieces form, 8 to 10 pulses per batch.

3. Cook pancetta mixture over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fat is rendered and fond begins to form on bottom of pot, about 5 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring constantly, until browned, about 90 seconds. Stir in 2 cups water, scraping up any browned bits. Stir in onions and bring to boil. Stir in 1/2 cup wine and 1 tablespoon marjoram. Add beef and push into onions to ensure that it is submerged. Transfer to oven and cook, uncovered, until beef is fully tender, 2 to 2 1/2 hours.

4. Transfer beef to carving board. Place pot over medium heat and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is almost completely dry. Stir in remaining 1/2 cup wine and cook for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Using 2 forks, shred beef into bite-size pieces. Stir beef and remaining 1 tablespoon marjoram into sauce and season with salt and pepper to taste. Remove from heat, cover, and keep warm.

5. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add rigatoni and 2 tablespoons salt and cook, stirring often, until just al dente. Drain rigatoni and add to warm sauce. Add Pecorino and stir vigorously over low heat until sauce is slightly thickened and rigatoni is fully tender, 1 to 2 minutes. Serve, passing extra Pecorino separately.

TECHNIQUE

SCIENCE: A SURPRISING FORMULA FOR MEATY FLAVOR

Believe it or not, much of the meaty flavor in our Genovese ragu actually comes from the 2 1/2 pounds of onions in our recipe. Specifically, the flavor stems from a compound in onions called 3-mercapto-2 methylpentan-1-ol, or MMP for short. When an onion is cut, some of its sulfur compounds combine to form a new compound: propanethial-S-oxide—the stuff that makes your eyes tear. When heated, this compound turns into MMP. And what does MMP taste like? Meat broth.

To harness MMP's full savory power, we switched from slicing to finely chopping the onions in a food processor to create even more opportunities for sulfur compounds to be released and transformed into MMP. But there's a hitch: MMP's flavor is water-soluble, which means that to create it, water must be present. And the more water the more beefy flavor that's extracted. By cooking the onions and meat in 2 cups of water (versus allowing them to simmer in their own juices), we were able to create a marked increase in meaty flavor.

LOTS OF ONIONS



PROCESSED FINE



PLUS WATER

