

Pork Sausages braised with Red Wine and Vine Fruits

You can eat sausages for any meal of the day and choose from hundreds of different kinds, but picking a good quality sausage is all important. This is just one of my recipes and giving a little twist to your good old bangers and mash....

Sausages can be made out of almost anything from your usual beef, pork and lamb to rabbit and kangaroo, but people tend to prefer the kind of sausage they were brought up with. In England pork sausage is the most popular, in Wales it's lamb and in Scotland it's beef.

The Sausage Recipe

Ingredients

450g (1lb) good quality pork sausages
225g (8oz) streaky bacon
225g (8oz) small button onions
2 cloves garlic crushed
400ml (14 fl oz) red wine
1 tsp fresh thyme leaves
3 tblsp balsamic vinegar
30g (2oz) sultanas
30g (2oz) prunes (stoned)
400ml (14 fl oz) passata
1 bay leaf
1 tblsp olive oil
salt and fresh milled black pepper

Instructions

Heat the olive oil in a pan and add the sausages, cook gently until brown all over. Remove the sausages from the pan using a perforated spoon and keep aside. Add the button onions to the pan that the sausages were cooked in and commence colouring. Add the diced bacon and brown, keeping the heat fairly high, add the balsamic vinegar. The vinegar will reduce down concentrating the sweetness and acidity to the dish, This in turn helps to counteract any fattiness from the sausage and bacon. Add the garlic, stir briefly and pour in the red wine and fruits, followed by the passata, bay leaf, thyme and a little black pepper.

Finally, return the sausages to the pan, cover with a lid and bring to the simmer. Turn down the heat and cook gently for 25 minutes. Check the liquid after that. If it's too thin, continue to simmer (with the lid off) for a further 10 minutes or until the sauce is thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.

Alan's tips

Adding red wine to dried fruits re-hydrates them with a fantastic flavour. You can either leave the mix aside and let it stand for about an hour and a half before adding it to the recipe, or simply whack them in the microwave for 20 seconds on high.

Use your most basic olive oil in this recipe. Don't bother with extra virgin as you're heating the olive oil and you lose the flavour anyway. And if you're worried about spending a fortune on expensive balsamic vinegar, try heating some cheaper varieties slowly in a small pan. Cook gently until reduced by half and this will increase the flavour tremendously.

Balsamic vinegar isn't just for savoury dishes and salad dressings, you can actually use it in desserts on things like strawberries. Try dipping one into your balsamic vinegar!

Sausage Science

The perfect sausage

The sausage not only contains meat but also up to 35% rusk - unleavened bread, toasted and ground down. This is better, from the sausage-maker's point of view than using, say, normal bread, as it can soak up lots more of the water and fat - about 20% more. But too much rusk and your sausage will taste bready. It's better to have a high meat content: check the packet, about 75% meat content is good. It's important for the meat not to be too lean though, as a bit of fat will help keep the sausage moist. Sausages with really lean meat can be dry and crumbly.

Bangers!

Don't prick your sausages because you'll lose some of the tasty juices. The name banger comes from the Second World War when meat shortages meant sausages had a higher water content, and when you cooked them the steam produced made them explode if they weren't pricked. You don't need to do this any more. You already lose about a quarter of the sausage's weight when you cook them, so it's not worth losing any more.

The beauty of Balsamic ...

Balsamic vinegar comes from the Trebbiano grape, which is about the sweetest grape you can get, so it's no surprise then that the vinegar is so sweet. You can get balsamic vinegar that's 30 years old or more. The longer you leave it to mature, the stronger and better the flavour. The water evaporates off and the molecules gradually break down over time. The smaller they become, the more easily they evaporate in your mouth, and so the stronger the smell and the better it tastes. Alan says it costs about £1 per year of ageing for Balsamic vinegar. But although the bottles get smaller and smaller with age, which makes them seem like even worse value, the flavour gets more and more concentrated, so strictly speaking, you don't need to use as much.

Accompaniment

Creamy Horseradish Mash

A plate of bangers and mash is comfort food at it's best. A creamy mashed potato is a perfect texture to complement the sausage. Here's my take on the great accompaniment...

The Mash Recipe

Ingredients

6 large potatoes (1 1/2 lb / 675g), peeled and quartered
2 tblsp horseradish sauce
30g/1oz butter, unsalted
75ml/5 tablespoons double cream
salt and pepper for seasoning

Instructions

Boil the peeled and washed potatoes in salted water. When cooked, drain off the water and return the potatoes to the pan. Put your potatoes back onto the heat and gently shake the pan, the remaining water evaporates off and leaves the outside of the potato dry and snowy. Place the potatoes in a bowl and mash then. Add all the remaining ingredients and beat in well. Season to taste and serve.

Alan's tips

Take care not to overcook the potatoes. One way of testing is to skewer the potato with a knife - it should lift with the knife but slide off the blade easily and effortlessly.

If using beef sausages, try making a mustard mash, or if using lamb, a roasted garlic mash works a treat.

Mash Science

The right potato

Choose a floury potato rather than a waxy one to get the fluffy texture that works so well for mash. King Edwards or Maris Pipers are good. When they are cooking the starch molecules in the potatoes start to soak up water and tangle to form a network that gently traps in water (a 'gel'). This has a soft texture, and you want this process to have happened to every part of each potato chunk, so they will mash up without leaving lumps. So cut all the potatoes to about the same thickness: then they will cook at the same rate and will all be done at around the same time. Adding salt raises the temperature that the water boils at a little and means they cook a bit faster.

Potato goodness

Don't overcook the potatoes. Just like any other vegetable, the longer you boil them, the more Vitamin C is lost. Also, too much vigorous heating starts to damage the gel structure. It won't be able to hold water as well, and the potatoes start to get watery (ie the water starts to come out instead of staying in the gel).

Don't put your potatoes into a food processor....

The blades of a food processor violently turning round actually slice through some of the starch molecules. That reduces their ability to hold the gel structure that they have formed, and you can end up with something a bit like wallpaper paste. By mashing by hand, you don't damage the molecules and you keep the light fluffy texture of cooked potato.

Perfect timing..

By getting rid of the moisture on the surface of the potatoes, they're more able to take in the butter, or other fat, that's added after mashing. Add the fat and the other ingredients *after* you've mashed the potato otherwise they don't get evenly distributed.