

My Real Deal Cuban Meal

As much as America has tried to distance itself from Cuba over the past 70 years because of politics, we just can't seem to isolate ourselves from Cuba's people, food, music, and culture. I guess for me it started with watching Desi Arnaz (a.k.a. Ricky Ricardo) play the conga and sing "chick chicky boom" (Cuban Pete) on the most popular television show of the time. Then there was Gloria Estefan, one of the most popular singers of the 1980s and 1990s and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Ry Cooder went to Havana in the late 1990s



to record traditional Cuban musicians for an album named *The Buena Vista Social Club*, which became wildly popular in America. Earnest Hemingway lived near Havana for 20 years, where he wrote some of his most famous novels. Several American restaurants and bars, mostly in Florida, still try to capture the romance of Hemingway's life in Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s.

Then there's the food! Oh, the food! I've been making a couple of Cuban dishes for about 30 years now. One is *enchilados*. No, not beans wrapped in a tortilla. It's shrimp or lobster cooked in a luxurious Cuban red sauce. It's pretty easy to make but one of those dishes that stuns everyone who tries it with its delectable aromas and flavors. My *Lodi Wine and Food* book has my *Caribbean Vacation Pork and Beans* meal, which includes Cuban-inspired marinated grilled pork medallions. However...

I've always wanted to make a true authentic classic Cuban meal. Named for its resemblance to a pile of "old clothes," *ropa vieja* is the national dish of Cuba and captures the Cuban spirit in an aromatic, rich, savory, peppery beef stew. The average American is prohibited from traveling to Cuba, but serve this dish with authentic Cuban black beans and Cuban white rice and you can travel to Havana for the evening without leaving your kitchen. This meal always seemed out of reach for me unless I was in a restaurant—until now. And you can make it to! The most traditional way to make it is with flank steak or untrimmed brisket, but I make it with the more readily available top round roast, most commonly called "London Broil," though that term actually refers to the cooking method rather than the cut of meat.

Because both the *ropa vieja* and the black beans rely on building layer upon layer of flavors during the cooking process, the key to this meal is doing your *mise en place*. Before you turn on the stove, you want all your ingredients cut, measured, and staged by the stove ready to add at the proper time.



Mise en Place for Ropa Vieja



Mise en Place for Cuban Black Beans

Timing each dish is important for serving your guests at a decent hour. I make the beans first and set them on a trivet with a lid on the pan to keep them warm, then I immediately start the *ropa vieja*. I start the rice just before I put the lid on the *ropa vieja* to braise the meat. That way, everything is ready to serve at the same time. After your *mise en place* is complete (including the boiled shredded meat), this whole process takes about 2 hours from turning on the stove to plating, so plan accordingly. This meal is portioned to serve 4 to 6 people.

Ropa Vieja

Ingredients

- 3 pounds flank steak or top round roast (London Broil)
- 1 head garlic, broken into peeled cloves
- 10 bay leaves
- 2 yellow onions, sliced into thin half-moons
- 1 orange bell pepper, cored, seeded, and sliced into 1/4-inch half-round strips
- 1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and sliced into 1/4-inch half-round strips
- 1 poblano (pasilla) pepper, cored, seeded, and sliced into 1/4-inch half-round strips
- 1/4 cup Lodi olive oil
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp freshly cracked black pepper
- 4 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
- 1 TBS tomato paste
- 1 cup Jenner Family Estates red wine
- 4 cups of the broth that the beef cooked in (strained)
- 1 packet Goya Sazón con culantro y achiote

Preparing the Meat

Put the meat in an 8-quart stockpot or a Dutch oven and cover it with water. Add 6 bay leaves, 1/2 tsp salt and the whole peeled garlic cloves. Bring it to a boil then lower to medium-high and continue boiling for 2 hours, adding water as needed to keep the meat covered. As foam forms on the water surface, skim it off with a slotted spoon to maintain a clean broth. When the meat is done, remove it from the pot and set it on a rack or a cutting board to cool. Make sure that it's tender enough for you to easily pull it apart. Save the water that the meat was cooked in to use as broth. Pour the cooking water through a strainer to collect at least 4 cups of clean broth. Once the meat is cool enough to handle. Pull the meat apart using your fingers or two forks. You want long pieces of meat about a half inch wide. You don't want it completely shredded into tiny fibers at this point. Discard any chewy or excessively fatty pieces.



Preparing the Sofrito (Flavor Base)

Cut each onion in half, lengthwise. Cut each end off and peel the skin off. Slice each half along its length into thin half-moon slices about 1/8-inch thick. Core a bell pepper and remove the seeds and white ribs. Stand the pepper up and slice it down into two halves. Slice the halves cross-wise to get thin half-round strips about 1/4 inch thick. Cut these slices in half to give strips that are about 1/4 inch wide by 1-1/2 to 2 inches long. Repeat for the other bell pepper. Slice the poblano the same way to get long thin strips.

Heat a sauté pan to medium heat. Coat the pan with olive oil. Add the onions, 4 bay leaves, 1/2 tsp of salt, and 1/2 tsp black pepper and sauté for 5 to 8 minutes until the onion pieces are soft but not browned.

Add the bell peppers, poblano pepper, 1/4 tsp of salt and the packet of sazón then sauté for about 3 to 5 minutes until the pieces are soft but not browned. Push the onions and peppers to one side of the pan, add a little olive oil to the empty part of the pan then put the garlic in the oil. Sauté the garlic by itself and stir until it becomes fragrant (about 30 seconds), then stir the garlic into the onion and pepper mix. Increase heat to just above medium. Add the tomato paste and stir. Add the wine and boil until the liquid is almost gone (about 2-3 minutes).



At this point, the sofrito is done (see photo to the right).



Reduce heat to medium low. Add the meat and stir. Add 3 cups of broth and see what consistency you have. You want just enough liquid to fill the bottom of the mix but you want some meat and vegetables showing above the liquid (see photo to the right). Add more broth, a half cup at a time, if you need more liquid. Cover the pot and braise the meat for about 15 to 20 minutes. Check it a couple of times to make sure the meat is steaming and the liquid is bubbling, but it should not be boiling over and popping through the lid. Remove the pan from the stove and set it on a trivet with the lid on to keep it warm until serving. Remove the bay leaves.



Run the remaining broth through a strainer and put it in a container, if you want to use it for other dishes or for soup. You can freeze the broth, and it should last about six months.



Cuban Black Beans

Ingredients

3 15-ounce cans of black beans (frijoles negros)
1/2 cup Lodi olive oil
2 yellow onions, cut small dice
3 bell peppers (one green, one red, and one orange), cut brunoise
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper
12 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
1 tsp tomato paste
2 bay leaves
1 packet Goya Sazón con culantro y achiote
1/4 cup Jenner Family Estates red wine
1 jalapeno sliced in half lengthwise
1/4 tsp red chili flakes
1/2 tsp cumin
1/4 tsp dried oregano
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 tsp hot sauce (optional)

Making the Sofrito

Heat a sauté pan to medium heat. Coat the pan with 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onions, bell peppers, 1/2 tsp of salt, and 1/2 tsp black pepper and sauté for about 5 to 8 minutes until the pieces are soft but not browned. Push the onions and peppers to one side of the pan, add a little olive oil to the empty part of the pan then put the garlic in the oil. Sauté the garlic by itself and stir until the garlic becomes fragrant (about 30 seconds), then stir the garlic into the onion and pepper mix. Add the tomato paste, bay leaves, Sazón, and wine and stir. Add the jalapeno halves, red pepper flakes, oregano, and cumin and stir.

Open the cans of black beans and pour only the liquid from each can into the pan. Stir and allow the mix to come to a full simmer. Add the vinegar, sugar, and remaining 2 tablespoons of olive oil and stir. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. In a simmer, steam is rising from the pot and a few bubbles are popping on the surface but it is not a rolling boil or splattering sauce out of the pot. The sofrito is done when the liquid is mostly gone and it becomes a thick sauce.



Making the Beans

Add the beans to the pan and stir (save the empty cans). Fill one empty bean can about half way with water. Swish to get all the remaining bean liquid into the water. Pour into another empty can and swish again. Pour into the third empty can and swish. This should give you about one cup of bean water to pour into the pan. Simmer for 10 to 15 minutes until the liquid is reduced by about half. Taste to see if it's spicy enough. If it needs more spice, add a quarter teaspoon of hot sauce. Set the pan on a trivet and cover to keep it warm until serving. Remove the bay leaves and jalapeno halves.

This recipe actually makes enough for 8 to 10 people. We make extra to get the right ingredient proportions in the sofrito. The extra cost is small and you will enjoy having leftovers of this great dish that you worked so hard on.

Cuban White Rice

Ingredients

2 cups white rice (Ben's Original or jasmine)

2-1/2 cups water

2 tsp Lodi olive oil

1/4 tsp salt

1 tsp butter

In a saucepan with a lid, bring the water to a boil. Put the dry rice in a strainer or colander and wash it under cold water until the water runs clear. Add the rice, olive oil, and salt to the saucepan and stir. Allow it to come to a boil then reduce to a simmer (low heat). Put the cover on the pot. Let the rice simmer for 15 minutes. Set the pot on a trivet. Fluff the rice with a fork and stir in the butter. Cover the pot for at least another 5 minutes before serving.