

Cassoulet

Cassoulet is a rich bean, pork, lamb, duck, onion, tomato and herb stew baked under a breadcrumb crust.

The word *cassoulet* comes from 'casserole', the earthenware pot in which cassoulet is baked, and it is a *plat mijoté* — a simmered dish — *par excellence*. It should be cooked at least one day in advance so that all the flavours successfully mingle. It is prepared with many different ingredients and takes a little time but is not difficult and is relatively inexpensive.

Cassoulet is often served at political banquets, family meals and village festivals. Prepared in advance, baked and served in its cooking dish, it needs little attention. M André Bonnaure remembers a cassoulet served to 400 guests on a national road which went through the centre of his village where local gendarmes had to divert the traffic for hours so that the beloved cassoulet could be enjoyed peacefully outdoors by the whole community.

This glorious stew may have been invented by the Arabs and originally prepared with butter beans and dried goose, but it has been part of southern French repertoire for about ten centuries. With its golden crust and its aromatic, creamy juices, cassoulet is a superb sight.

The three most celebrated versions of cassoulet today are those of Carcassonne, Toulouse and Castelnaudary — the Mecca of cassoulet. In mediæval Carcassonne, lamb, and even an occasional partridge, may be included. In Toulouse, the city of Aerospatiale where Concorde was, and the European Airbus is assembled, pieces of preserved duck or goose and local pork sausages enrich the bean stew. In Castelnaudary, preserved duck, onions, garlic, bacon and pork rind are added to the beans.

Leftover cassoulet freezes well and improves as it is re-heated.

As for dishes to accompany this splendid recipe, in Languedoc, asparagus and melon are served before a Cassoulet, and it is usually followed by a tossed salad. A lemon, raspberry or armagnac sorbet or a fresh fruit salad are the only desserts one can possibly contemplate after a Cassoulet.

This recipe serves about ten, but depending on appetite it could serve between eight and twenty.

Ingredients

For the duck

4 pieces preserved duck confit
or 5 pieces fresh duck
handful of rough sea salt

3 teaspoons dried thyme
1 tablespoon dry white wine
salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the beans

900g dried white haricot beans
675g unsmoked bacon shoulder joint
bacon rind, cut into 2.5cm pieces
2 large onions, chopped
4 tomatoes, skinned and quartered
6 carrots, sliced
1 leek, thickly sliced

4 teaspoons dried thyme
3 bay leaves
2 cloves
4 cloves garlic, crushed
4 fresh Toulouse (or similar) sausages
225g cured ham (optional)

For the lamb

1 tablespoon groundnut oil
1.4kg lean stewing lamb
3 onions, chopped
400g tomatoes

6 cloves garlic, crushed
3 bay leaves
900ml dry white wine
600ml water

To finish

1 clove garlic
5 teaspoons dried thyme
4 tablespoons dry white wine
4-5 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

100g fresh breadcrumbs
1 tablespoon groundnut, olive or walnut
oil or butter
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)

If you have confit, preserved duck, you do not need to season or cook it before adding it to the casserole. If you use fresh duck, rub the pieces with salt and thyme, cover and refrigerate overnight.

Method

- Soak the beans overnight in cold water. Drain and rinse then place in a pan, cover with fresh water, bring to the boil and boil for about 10 minutes, as directed on the packet. Leave to cool, then drain.
- Place the beans in a large pot with the bacon, rind, vegetables, herbs, cloves and garlic. Just cover with water, bring to the boil, then lower the heat, cover the pot and simmer gently for about 1 hour. Add the sausages, cover again and continue to simmer for a further 30 minutes until the beans are soft but not creamy. Add the cured ham, if using, for the last few minutes of cooking. Remove from the heat and drain, reserving the stock for later use. Refrigerate the beans and meat and the broth.
- Cube the lamb to 5cm — shank or boned shoulder will be best — and pat the lamb cubes dry with kitchen paper.

- Heat the oil in a frying pan. Add the lamb to the oil and brown on all sides. Discard the fat, add a drop more oil and fry the onions and celery for 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes (peeled if fresh), garlic, bay leaves, wine and water and season with salt. Bring to the boil then simmer for 1 hour, uncovered. Remove the meat from the broth. Strain the broth through a sieve, pushing with a wooden spoon to squeeze out all the juices. Place the lamb back in the broth, cool then refrigerate.
- Pre-heat the oven to 190°C.
- Pat the pieces of fresh duck dry with kitchen paper and roast in the oven for 1.5 hours. Add the tablespoon of wine to the pan over a low heat and scrape the coagulated juices with a fork. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and reserve both the juices and the duck for later use.
- Remove the lamb from the refrigerator and discard all the fat which will have congealed on the top. Remove the beans and meat from the refrigerator, slice the sausages, cut the bacon into 5cm pieces and cut the cured ham into about 6 pieces. If you cannot use Toulouse sausage, then cotechino, salsietta or a good Hungarian sausage such as mangalica or gyulai will do.
- Rub a large 4.5l earthenware or porcelain ovenproof casserole dish with a clove of garlic. Place half the beans in the bottom and sprinkle with a little thyme, wine and pepper. Add the pieces of lamb and the sliced sausages then add more beans. Add the pieces of cooked duck or confit and cured ham and finally the remaining beans. Sprinkle a little salt and pepper on top then add the deglazed juices from the duck. Add enough of the cooking broth to cover the top of the ingredients and keep the rest at hand since you will add a little more later on as the juices evaporate, and the beans must remain moist as they cook. Sprinkle with the parsley then the breadcrumbs and sprinkle with oil. You may like to prepare everything up to this point then refrigerate until 2 hours before you are ready to serve.
- Pre-heat the oven to 190°C. Place the cassoulet dish in the top third of the oven and cook for 20 minutes. Pierce the golden crust on top three or four times with the back of a spoon but don't stir, and add a little broth on the edges of the dish so the beans remain moist. Reduce the oven temperature to 150°C and continue to cook for a further 1.5 hours.
- Just as you are ready to serve, you might sprinkle a little finely chopped parsley and garlic on top. Wrap the dish in a thick towel, bring it straight to the table and serve from the baking dish.

Simple cassoulet

This is a much simpler cassoulet recipe which omits the lamb stew. This recipe serves 4-6. Cassoulet is best prepared the day before serving as the flavours improve with re-heating and the fat can be removed. Re-heat at 200°C.

Ingredients

1.2kg dried white haricot beans	450 g salt belly of pork
1 large onion, chopped	350 g green collar of bacon
4 tomatoes, skinned and chopped	1 tablespoon oil
5 cloves garlic, chopped	8 Toulouse sausages or similar
2 bay leaves	a 1.8kg duck or 8 pieces confit
2 sprigs fresh thyme	2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
2 sprigs fresh parsley	25g breadcrumbs

Method

- Drain the beans and put them into a large pan with enough water to cover. Bring to the boil then cook rapidly for 10 minutes, skimming off any scum. Add the onion, tomatoes, garlic, herbs, salt pork and bacon. Cover and simmer gently for 1 hour. Meanwhile, heat the oil and cook the sausages until browned all over. If you cannot use Toulouse sausage, then cotechino, salsietta or good quality Hungarian sausage such as mangalica or gyulai will do.
- If using fresh duck, pre-heat the oven to 200°C. Place the joints in a rack in a roasting tin and cook in the oven for 1 hour. Remove from the oven and reserve the duck fat. If you are using confit, omit this stage.
- Drain the beans, reserving the liquid. Remove the meat. Cut the bacon, pork and duck into large pieces. Cut the sausages into large chunks.
- Pre-heat the oven to 200°C.
- To assemble the stew, spoon half the beans into a large casserole dish. Add the duck, bacon, pork and sausages then cover with the remaining beans. Pour in enough of the bean liquid to cover the beans, adding extra stock or water if necessary. Sprinkle with parsley then breadcrumbs, and drizzle the duck fat over the top, if liked. Bake in the oven for 1.5 hours. The crust which forms on top should be broken into the stew every 30 minutes, without stirring. If the stew begins to dry out, add a drop of stock or water. Remove from the oven and serve from the cooking pot.