



FOOD

# It Takes a Village to Braise a Brisket

by Liz Grossman — JANUARY 21, 2015

**W**hen I was growing up, brisket was always a mystery to me. It emerged in all of its tender glory once a year on Passover, when my mom would plunk down a heavy floral-patterned platter piled high with semi-dry slices of brown meat. My six siblings and I would proceed to dig in after our gefilte fish (another beloved dish), before our kosher apple cake. Our Seders have always been filled with traditions: Think finger puppets fashioned after the seven plagues to spice up the service, crackly matzo smeared with mouth-searing horseradish sauce and of course, beef brisket as the main course.

As I got older and started attending Shabbat diners and Passover Seders at other people's homes, my ingrained notion of brisket was turned upside down. What was this crusty char? Why was this version so fall-apart tender? And how was the tangy, ketchup-soaked glaze replaced with sweet and fruity undertones? Like many family traditions, brisket runs deep. These recipes are often passed down through generations, including my mother, who learned how to make it from her mother-in-law. She most likely learned how to make it from hers.

It wasn't until I embarked on making brisket for the first time for a New Year's Eve dinner party that I had some serious decisions to make. I started by asking around for recipes, tips and techniques. This might have been my first mistake. I understand there are many ways to braise a piece of meat, but when it comes to brisket, recipes are set in stone. "We use beer," said my 90-year-old aunt, who also throws in brown sugar, chili sauce, sweet onion. My mother opts for pepper, garlic powder, a package of Lipton onion soup, Wishbone Italian dressing, Worcestershire sauce and, well, yes, ketchup. The suggestion of browning the meat first was met with quizzical looks from both. I also found out—after eating this dish for 30 or so years—that after four hours in the oven, my mother removes the meat, slices it and puts it back in for an hour. This completely defied everything I *did* know about letting meat rest before you cut it to maintain juiciness.

"It saves time," explained the woman who was also used to cooking for seven children.

*Plate's* head food stylist, Carol Smoler, (who's a gold mine of great recipes) also had a "savory" holiday brisket, made with an onion, tomato sauce, low-sodium onion soup mix and Bennett's chili sauce. "This is so easy, it's scary!" she exclaimed. Our former creative director, Queenie Burns, gave me a version that fell on the opposite end of the flavor spectrum: browned and braised with cranberries, red wine, molasses, a bay leaf and pearl onions. She also promised ease, simplicity and deliciousness. So far this was the strongest contender. Because packaged soup mix? Really? Apparently it's a thing.

So I knew I could go with sweet, savory or suds, but then there was the technique to tackle. "Don't let them trim more than 1/2-inch of fat off," cautioned a friend. "Or you'll lose all the flavor." A Martha Stewart recipe called for only 1/4-inch of fat. "Figures Martha's version would suggest that," scoffed the same friend. "It's not enough."

Fat-trimming politics aside, I also realized that my Dutch oven was going to be too small for a three-pound brisket. This caused another conundrum. One friend told me to cut the meat in half and stack the slices on top of each other. "It'll work, if you keep dousing it with gravy," he said. Another said to do it in two parts over two days, or just stuff the whole thing in a roasting pan and cover it with tin foil. This directly contradicted another repeated warning to use a pot with a very heavy, airtight lid.

As the brisket plot thickened, so did the perfect gravy I was striving for. One recipe called for adding flour to the bottom of the pan for 30 seconds after you brown the meat but before you start the braise. "Skip that part, just dust the meat with the flour itself," a friend advised, while another suggested letting everything cook and adding the flour or cornstarch to the gravy.

Other tips poured in, from seasoning the meat the night before to stuffing it into my Dutch oven. "It'll shrink," at least a few people said.

The stream of endless (and adamant) tips sounded like 12 brisket-whisperers (aka Jewish *bubbes*) all *kibitzing* in my ear at the same time. I realized the best way to start was, well, just do it. I borrowed a larger Dutch oven from a friend and went with the sweet cranberry version, which intrigued me from the beginning. I defied my relatives by browning the meat, and decided to put the flour in the pan first. At the end, I made sure the meat was fork-tender and sliced *after* it had rested—a tip I'm considering passing along to my mom. How was it? Delicious. And even better the next day on an onion roll slathered with horseradish sauce. Next time I might go longer on the browning, season the meat the night before and well, make a bigger brisket for more leftovers.



Ask a colleague, friend or grandma about any recipe and you're always going to get a different perspective. But when that recipe is tied to tradition, it's hard to get anyone to budge on what they know and love. The key (and what we strive for in every issue of *Plate*) is to take what simply sounds delicious (cranberries, red wine and beef), reject what seems suspect (stuffing meat into a too-small pot) and leaving the rest up to your own instincts. Just don't slice the meat in the oven.

*Liz Grossman is the managing editor of Plate.*

How do you make beef brisket your own? Tell us in the comments below or tweet us @platemagazine.

---

---

---

**Ishma P.** replied on January 21, 2015 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/23401#COMMENT-23401\)](#)

Wonderful article. I'm going have to try that combination.

An advertisement for "ICONS of EUROPEAN TASTE". The top section features three product images: a loaf of bread with a "DANIELE" logo, a wheel of cheese with a "GRANA PADANO" logo, and a plate of salmon with a "PARMA" logo. Below the images is a blue button that says "LEARN MORE". At the bottom, there are logos for the European Union and a banner that says "ENJOY IT'S FROM EUROPE". A small text box at the bottom right says "CAMPAIGN FINANCED WITH AID FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION."



ADD A WORLD OF FLAVOR  
TO YOUR MENU. LEARN MORE.

