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Lamb dinners, a spring specialty, keep life simple

By Kelly Watts

April 25, 1999

Lamb is a new passion of mine. When I was young, the mere smell of roasting lamb was enough to make me rush outside for fresh air. Now it seems I can't get enough and, lucky for me, there's no better time to enjoy lamb than spring.

Lamb, with the exception of the mysterious stuff used in gyros, always seems sophisticated. At Ecole de Cuisine in Kohler, Jill Prescott once demonstrated how to cook a rack of lamb (the epitome of culinary elegance in my opinion). I was certain this was going to be a complicated procedure. Instead, I was amazed to find how simple it is to prepare: brush with a little oil, season and roast.

I mentally filed this technique away as a "big bang for little effort" recipe. I since have discovered that most grocery store butchers will "french the rack" for you while you shop, making a rack of lamb even more attractive, figuratively and literally, for the time-short cook. Frenching the rack, or cutting away the meat from the end of a rib or chop to display part of the bone, somehow makes the whole meal seem important.

Less expensive cuts of lamb are great for less formal, but still impressive, dinners. Slow cooking techniques such as braising, simmering or boiling bring out the flavor of the meat while making it tender. This week's menu uses less expensive cuts of lamb to rave reviews. In both recipes the meat is first browned, then cooked, covered, in a flavorful liquid -- either wine or broth.

While they both take between 1 1/2 hours to 2 hours in the oven to cook, they require only about 10 minutes of time to prep. When you get home from work, prep and pop the dish into the oven. Then go do something else -- plant a couple of pansies, check the kids'

Shopping List

Baking goods
2 tablespoons flour

Condiments, oils, vinegars
1 1/2 tablespoons canola oil
1 tablespoon olive oil

Meat
8 lamb loin chops (about 2 1/2 pounds total)
1 pound lamb, cubed for stew

Miscellaneous dry goods
1 can (14 1/2 ounces) reduced- salt chicken broth

Pasta, rice and beans
1 box (10 ounces) couscous

Produce
4 baking potatoes
8 shallots

Shelf fruit
8 ounces pitted prunes

Spices
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon curry powder
1 teaspoon dried cilantro
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1/2 teaspoon coriander
1/4 teaspoon cayenne
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Spirits
2 cups red wine

Shopping list covers ingredients needed for recipes only.

homework, go for a walk or simply enjoy a relaxing evening not spent laboring in the kitchen.

Lamb with Prunes and Shallots Steamed green beans lightly tossed with butter and toasted hazelnuts

Moroccan-Spiced Lamb Chops with Couscous Steamed carrots and sugar snap peas tossed with orange juice -----

Red wine and pepper offset the sweetness of the prunes in this dish. If the grocery store doesn't have cubed lamb for stew, pick up 2 pounds of lamb shoulder chops and cube it yourself, discarding excess fat and bones.

Lamb with Prunes and Shallots

1 pound lamb, cubed for stew
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 tablespoons flour
1 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper, or more, to taste
8 shallots, peeled and trimmed
2 cups red wine
4 baking potatoes, scrubbed and pierced several times with tines of fork
8 ounces pitted prunes

Preheat oven to 350 degrees and put 8-by-12-by-2-inch baking dish in oven to warm.

In large non-stick skillet over medium-high heat, brown all sides of lamb in oil. Add flour, salt and pepper and stir well. Cook 1 minute. Add shallots and wine; bring to boil.

Transfer mixture to hot baking dish and cover. Bake in preheated oven 1 1/4 hours, stirring once, and placing potatoes on rack in oven halfway through.

Add prunes to lamb mixture and season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir well and bake, covered, 30 more minutes.

Halve potatoes lengthwise and top with lamb mixture. Serve immediately. Makes 4 servings.

Per serving: 620 calories, 85g carbohydrates, 31g protein, 10g total fat (2g saturated), 74mg cholesterol, 9g fiber, 560mg sodium. Calories from fat: 15%.

This is one of my favorite dishes.

Moroccan-Spiced Lamb Chops with Couscous

1 teaspoon curry powder
1 teaspoon dried cilantro
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1/4 teaspoon ground cayenne
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon salt
8 lamb loin chops (about 2 1/2 pounds total), excess fat trimmed
1 1/2 tablespoons canola oil
1 can (14 1/2 ounces) reduced-salt chicken broth
1/2 cup water
1 box (10 ounces) couscous

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Combine spices and salt in shallow bowl. Lightly press all sides of chops into spice mixture; shake off excess.

In large stovetop-to-oven skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat until hot. Quickly brown chops on all sides, about 5 minutes total. Add broth; bring to a boil. Cover and place in preheated oven; bake 1 1/2 hours, turning once.

When done, carefully pour 1 1/2 cups of cooking liquid and water into a medium-sized saucepan; bring to boil. Stir in couscous, remove from heat, cover and let sit 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, keep chops and remaining cooking liquid warm.

To serve, divide couscous among 4 plates; top each with 2 chops and spoon a quarter of reserved liquid over all. Makes 4 servings.

Per serving: 472 calories, 18g carbohydrates, 51g protein, 18g total fat (5g saturated), 149mg cholesterol, 1g fiber, 860mg sodium. Calories from fat: 34%.

Kelly Watts is co-partner of an e-mail recipe business called e-Cuisine, providing subscribers weekly with five coordinated menus and recipes similar to those offered in this column. For more information, check out her Web site at www.kissthecook.com ; e-mail her at cook@kissthecook.com .

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