

## Boeuf bourguignon

*I firmly believe that **old classics** are old classics for a reason – they're utterly delicious – and therefore should not be overlooked on the assumption they're either too boring or too fussy and antiquated. Boeuf bourguignon is the perfect example; you just can't beat slow cooked beef with the simple additional flavours of red wine, bacon, onions and mushrooms. For maximum flavour, make this a day in advance.*



*While staying in Paris at the start of our culinary travels in 2008, I took a class with **chef Eric Fraudeau**. On my request, and despite having made them all many times before, we cooked boeuf bourguignon, gratin dauphinois and tarte Tatin. It's always fascinating to see how different people approach the classic dishes; there's always more than one way. Sometimes they turn out equally delicious but for different reasons; other times you come to realise there's a reason behind the original recipe. (That's assuming you can put your finger on an 'original' recipe; such dishes are usually highly contested.) Boeuf bourguignon is traditionally served with boiled potatoes, but if you're up for a really rich meal, the gratin dauphinois works a treat.*

*Eric's bourguignon was pretty standard, with all the usual suspects for ingredients. I have only made some slight alterations for the recipe here. Eric recommends **beef cheek** – it will cook down to the most unctuous, tender and tasty mouthfuls you can imagine. However, I was disappointed to find that I cannot get beef cheeks where I live. In Paris it was easy – Eric took us to a series of wonderful butchers selling all kinds of things, including horse. In England, my local butcher tells me, EU laws are applied more strictly and due to the additional regulations surrounding carcass heads (think BSE and the rest ...) there are more steps and inspections in the process. The result is that what should be one of the cheapest cuts becomes too expensive for most butchers to bother with.*

*In place of cheek, my butcher recommends **chuck steak**, which is from the shoulder. If not that, then any good stewing cut - such as rump, round or shin - would do. For the wine, the only book I have that actually recommends using a Burgundy is the little 'recettes bourguignonnes' cookbook I found in Beaune. Everyone else recommends something fuller bodied, such as a **Côtes du Rhône**. Finally, I can't tell you what a difference good bacon makes. Try to avoid those packets of pre-cut 'lardons' in supermarkets; they're full of water and taste of little. Instead, see if your local butcher sells **bacon bits** leftover from his own slicing.*

**Serves: 6**

**Total time: 4 hours (of which nearly 3 with feet up)**

1kg 200g beef cheek or chuck, with plenty of fatty marbling, in thick 2-3" pieces  
150g bacon bits or 'lardons'  
2-3 tbsps vegetable oil or lard  
2 large onions (c. 400g), peeled and finely diced  
2 tbsps plain flour  
2 fat cloves garlic, peeled and well mashed or pounded  
1 bottle full-bodied red wine, such as a Côtes du Rhône  
bouquet garni of 2 bay leaves, 2 thyme sprigs and 2 parsley stalks  
salt and pepper  
18 baby onions or shallots, peeled and left whole  
600g button mushrooms, wiped with a cloth to clean if needed and left whole  
50g butter

1. Season meat well with salt and pepper on all sides and set aside to allow seasoning to penetrate the flesh. (If it oozes water, pat it dry before searing it.)
2. Set a large, wide and heavy casserole dish (preferably made of enamelled cast iron) over medium heat and brown bacon bits, using a little oil or lard if needed. Remove bacon to a plate with a slotted spoon, leaving behind the fat.
3. If needed, add a little more oil or lard, then brown meat quickly in batches. Don't crowd the pan, and make sure the residue does not burn or you will need to clean out the pot before the next step. Remove meat to a plate, leaving behind the fat.
4. If needed, add a little more oil or lard, then soften and lightly caramelize onions.
5. Add back in bacon and beef, then sprinkle over flour and cook for another few minutes, stirring occasionally, to lightly brown the floury paste.
6. Add garlic, wine, herbs and a sprinkling of salt and pepper. Stir, cover and bring to a boil. Then reduce to a very low simmer and cook for a total of 3 hours, or until the meat is so tender it's falling apart. Stir gently once in a while. If you prefer, you can cook it in the oven to free up the hob and ensure even heat. Choose a temperature which results in gentle simmering, around 150-160C.
7. Meanwhile, prepare trimmings: caramelize onions in half the butter in a frying pan. Stir or toss frequently to ensure even caramelizing and season lightly with salt. Remove onions to a plate and repeat with mushrooms and remaining butter.
8. Add onions to casserole after 2 hours of cooking, and mushrooms half an hour later. Stir them in gently so as not to break up the onions. If sauce is still too thin, leave the casserole uncovered as it cooks for the last half hour or so.
9. Before serving remove bouquet garni, check seasoning and adjust if needed. If it tastes too winey and bitter a teaspoon of sugar and knob of cold butter can help. It should be utterly delicious, especially if served the next day.

