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Old-Fashioned American Beef Stew

(Makes 4 servings)

A recipe for an old-fashioned American beef stew is a must for a stew bible. But what a difficult time I had creating a recipe because there are thousands of different versions. I did know that I would want a beef stew from New England because that's where some early American Beef stews were to be found. This recipe is from Massachusetts, not from a particular place, but generally the kind of beef stew that some old Yankee would have made 50 years ago, perhaps in a place like Arlington, Massachusetts, where my neighbor, Al Thyne, lived for 96 years, until he died a few years ago. His family was from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and an old, hardy Yankee family like that with a gaggle of hungry children would love a beef stew like this one. Their small house on Spy Pond would be steamy with flavors, the windows clouded while outside a raging nor'easter piled snow up to the porch, and the kids would come in from sledding and gobble up a piping hot beef stew. I have not "modernized" this stew at all by adding wine or chile pepper or oregano; it's just old-fashioned. Typically, American beef stew is served with dumplings.

1-3/4 pounds boneless beef chuck, trimmed of any large pieces of fat, and cut into large bite-size pieces

1/4 cup unbleached all-purpose flour

Salt and freshly ground pepper

3 tablespoons unsalted butter or finely chopped beef suet

1 medium-size onion, chopped

2 cups cold water

1 pound red potatoes, peeled and cubed

1-1/2 carrots, diced

1 large parsnip, peeled and diced

1 medium-size turnip, peeled and diced

1 recipe Dumplings (optional)

1. Dredge the beef in the flour, salt, and pepper, tapping off any excess. In a large casserole, Dutch oven, or stew pot, melt the butter over medium-high heat. Brown the meat on all sides, about 8 minutes. Add the onion and cook until soft, stirring and scraping the bottom of the pot, about 4 minutes. Pour in the water to barely cover, bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low. Stir a bit, then simmer until the meat is tender, about 2 hours.

2. Add the potatoes, carrots, parsnip, and turnip and continue to cook until everything is very tender, about 1 hour more, stirring every once in a while. Add the dumplings, if desired, cover, and cook for 20 minutes without removing the cover. Serve immediately.