

Lamb Stew with Artichokes and Onions

(serves 4-6)

3 tablespoons olive oil
3 ounces of pancetta, diced
2 pounds of boneless cubed lamb, surface fat and membrane removed
4 cloves of garlic, peeled and crushed
1 cup of dry white vermouth or dry white wine
1 tablespoon tomato paste (if you have ripe tomatoes, you may use 1 large one or 2 small ones, peeled, seeded, and juiced instead of the tomato paste)
bouquet garni of 3 sprigs of parsley and 1 bay leaf tied together with kitchen string
½ teaspoon of dried thyme (or more to taste)
2 large artichokes or 3-4 medium ones, trimmed, chokes removed
½ pound of sweet onions, peeled and cut into wedges (in the spring you may substitute whole onions the size of golf balls for the onion wedges)
salt
pepper

Equipment: A heavy sauté pan or shallow casserole with a lid for cooking the lamb, a small plate, a large plate, a slotted spoon, a wooden spoon, a second casserole with a lid large enough to hold the artichokes and onions, kitchen string for tying the bouquet garni.

1. Warm 2 T of the olive oil in the sauté pan; add the pancetta and sauté over moderate heat until the pancetta is crisp and has rendered its fat. Remove the pancetta to the small plate and set aside.
2. Add the cubed lamb to the pan and sauté until the pieces are nicely browned on all sides. You will need to do this in 2 or 3 batches, depending on the size of the pan (don't crowd it or the pieces won't brown properly). When the lamb pieces are browned, remove them to the large plate with the slotted spoon.
3. Discard all of the fat left in the sauté pan. Add the vermouth or white wine to the pan. Stir and scrape the bottom of the pan with the wooden spoon to dissolve any crystallized juices. Add the garlic, the tomato paste, the browned lamb, the bouquet garni, and the thyme. Season with salt and pepper. Bring the contents of the pan to the boil. Cover the pan, reduce the heat to low, and simmer slowly for 1 hour. If the liquid seems too scant, add a couple of tablespoons of water.
4. While the lamb is cooking, trim the artichokes, cut into quarters, and remove the chokes. If the artichokes are large, cut the quarters in half. Add the artichoke pieces to the second casserole and toss them with 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add the onions, peeled and cut into wedges, and a light sprinkle of salt. Cover the casserole and set it over very low heat for 20-25 minutes, shaking occasionally to move the vegetables around. You want the onions and artichokes to cook very slowly without browning.
5. After the lamb has cooked for 1 hour, add the artichokes and onions and the reserved pancetta to the sauté pan and cook the vegetables and meat together for another 30 minutes or so until they are tender. Remove the bouquet garni and correct the seasoning with salt and pepper, as needed. Serve from the casserole with couscous, noodles, or boiled new potatoes. (Note: this dish may be made in advance and reheated at serving time. The stew may also be frozen for later use.)