

LIFE

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Tender pork stew is stocked with vegetables, prunes and Mediterranean-style seasonings. ERIC AKIS

FOOD

Prunes give gourmet flair to Mediterranean-style pork stew

ERIC AKIS
In Our Backyard

Pork works particularly well with fruit — for example, pork cutlets served with apple-sauce, apricot-stuffed roast pork and sweet and sour pork with pineapple.

Prunes — dried plums — also go well with pork, as in today's recipe for Mediterranean-style pork stew with vegetables and prunes.

According to the *New Food Lover's Companion*, any plum can be made into a prune, but those with the greatest flavour, sweetness and firmness are best suited for that use.

Prunes have dense texture and a deep, raisiny, sweet wine-like flavour. When they're added to a savoury dish, those qualities can make even humble creations such as stew become quite gourmet.

To make the stew, cubes of pork loin were coated in flour, seared in a skillet, then set in a casserole. In that skillet,

I then made a saucy mixture with a mix of vegetables, stock and Mediterranean-style flavourings, such as wine, tomato, orange, oregano and balsamic vinegar.

I added pitted prunes to that mixture, then poured it over the pork. The pork was then covered and baked in the oven until pleasingly tender and wonderfully flavoured by the other ingredients.

You could serve the pork stew with orzo, rice pilaf, couscous or quinoa.

Mediterranean-style Pork Stew with Vegetables and Prunes

Tender, oven-stewed pork rich with vegetables and prunes, accented with Mediterranean-style tastes, such as balsamic vinegar, wine, garlic and oregano.

Preparation time: 45 minutes
Cooking time: 95 to 110 minutes
Makes: four servings

1 1/3 pounds (about 600 grams) boneless pork loin chops or roast, trimmed of excess fat and cut into 1-inch cubes (see Eric's options)

1/4 cup all purpose flour
• salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
3 Tbsp olive oil
1 medium onion, diced (cut into

1/2-inch cubes)
1 medium green bell pepper, diced
1 medium carrot, diced
1 to 2 large garlic cloves, minced
1 tsp dried oregano
2 Tbsp tomato paste
1 1/2 cups chicken stock
1/2 cup orange juice
1/2 cup red wine (see Eric's options)
2 Tbsp balsamic vinegar
1 Tbsp brown sugar
12 to 16 pitted prunes
1 Tbsp chopped fresh parsley

Place the flour in a bowl. Season the pork with salt and pepper, set in the bowl with the flour, and toss to coat. Preheat oven to 350 F. Set out a 13- x 9-inch casserole.

Place the oil in a large skillet set over medium, medium-high heat. When oil is hot, shake the excess flour of each piece of pork, and then sear the pork, in batches, until nicely browned. When all the pork has been browned, add the onion, bell pepper and carrot to the skillet and cook and stir four minutes. Mix in the garlic, oregano and tomato paste and cook and stir one minute more. Add the stock, juice, wine, vinegar and sugar to the skillet, mix to combine and bring to a simmer. Season mixture with salt and pepper, and then mix in the prunes.

Pour this mixture over the pork in the casserole. Cover with

foil and bake in the oven 75 to 90 minutes, or until pork is tender. Serve the stew right from the casserole, or transfer to a serving dish, sprinkle with parsley and enjoy.

Eric's options: Cubes of boneless pork leg, or cubes of pork stewing meat, could replace the cubed pork loin in this recipe. If you can't have wine or don't wish to use it, replace it with 1/2 cup unsweetened grape juice, or another 1/2 cup of stock.

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Festival Celebrates all things whisky

The Victoria Whisky Festival starts Thursday and wraps up on Sunday at Victoria's Hotel Grand Pacific. It includes whisky-tasting events, whisky masterclasses and a whisky and chocolate (for women only) event, among others.

For more information about the festival and ticket packages, go to the festival's website, victoriawhiskyfestival.com. Tickets for the event are available at the Strath Liquor Store or via strathliquor.com/victoria-whisky-festival-tickets.

Eric Akis is the author of eight cookbooks. His columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday.

A case of muscle spasms only happens on weekends

DR. KEITH ROACH
Your Good Health

Dear Dr. Roach: I've had muscle spasms and cramping in my lower legs and feet for quite some time. It almost always happens when I'm laying in bed and in the early morning hours. If I stand up and walk around, it stops, but if I lay back down, it usually starts up again.

I am 65 and exercise daily, usually 40-50 minutes on an arc trainer and another 20 minutes on the treadmill. I'm 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weigh 145 pounds. The cramps usually happen on Saturday and Sunday mornings, never during the week. Exercise during the week usually starts around 5 p.m. On the weekends, it varies depending on the day's plan.

Anon.

Nocturnal leg cramps are common. It's estimated that nearly half of people over 50 have them. My first-line treatment is stretching, specifically the back of the upper leg (hamstring) and lower leg (calf) muscles at least four times daily. I also advise light exercise before bed. Many of my patients and readers have noted that keeping the bedsheets and covers tightly tucked in is a big trigger for cramps.

In your case, because they are happening only on the weekend, there's something different about your routine on the weekend. It could be the timing of your exercise as your letter seems to suggest, but I also wonder about some other potential causes.

One important one is alcohol. If it's your habit to have even a glass or two on Friday and Saturday nights, this is one likely reason why you might have muscle cramps just on Saturday and Sunday.

If stretching doesn't work, and you can't figure out the cause, then a visit to your doctor is in order. There are some medical conditions that cause leg cramps (especially sleep disorders like restless leg syndrome). Although many of my patients try supplements, I haven't seen a lot of benefit. However, a trial of a B complex vitamin wouldn't hurt.

Dear Dr. Roach: I am a 79-year-old woman. I came down with COVID about a year ago, and it lasted for about a week and a half. I have been in pretty good health since then, except for a mucus/phlegm buildup in my throat. Every morning, there is a lot of coughing. It is clear and has no colour.

I asked my doctor about it, and his response was, "That's a tough one. Try Ricola cough drops!" They don't help. Any suggestions?

M.M.

Persistent mucus in the back of the throat either comes from the nasopharynx (if it's post-nasal drip) or the lungs. For my patients with this concern, I make a diagnosis with a careful exam.

If I think the problem is post-nasal drip, I'll try a drug to reduce it, such as a nasal steroid. Sometimes this solves the problem, but there are alternatives if this doesn't work. A salt water gargle may help.

If the mucus in the back of the throat seems to be coming from the lungs, I suspect asthma, which produces abnormal mucus. A cough is common after COVID, but it usually doesn't last a year. Again, a trial of an asthma medicine is one approach, while other physicians might recommend pulmonary function testing.

I recommend a more thorough evaluation with at least a chest X-ray.

Email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu

Boozy ski-chalet guests might not be invited next year

LISI TESHER
Ask Lisi

Dear Lisi: Over the holidays, I had some friends come up to my ski chalet. For the most part, we had a good time. But one couple was off-putting, and I couldn't put my finger on why. It's taken me a little bit of time but now I realize what it was — they did nothing to contribute to the weekend, and in fact, almost sabotaged one evening.

We were a few couples, with a few teenagers, who all flowed in and out over the course of 10 days. Any time anyone arrived, they called first and asked what they could bring on top of the initial plan, which was that eve-

ryone would be responsible for a meal or two, even if that just meant making sure we had eggs for breakfast.

This couple offered to bring all the beverages, which we thought was a great idea. However, all they brought was a case of water, two six-packs of beer, and two bottles of wine — for 10 days and 14 people (some of the teenagers are old enough to drink). And they didn't have teenagers who came and went who we could have asked to top up their contribution.

And the craziest part is that they drank everything in sight whenever there was alcohol present. There was so much going on that my wife and I didn't realize what was happening until they left, and we were lying in bed recapping the fun. Also, on New Year's Eve, the wife got so drunk that she was hitting on one of the other men present. He was drunk as well and was just laughing, but his wife was getting angrier by the minute. Thankfully, her husband passed

out before the other woman made any real moves.

So, now what do we do? The rest of our guests are talking about them too.

Disengaged Guests

You learn from your experience, and you don't include them in your next group holiday. Or you include them but give them a specific list of what they need to bring and know that they won't contribute any other way. It all depends on the relationship. If they were just a couple you brought up for fun and numbers, then they won't be missed. But if they're part of your larger group, then you need to deal with it as a group.

Dear Lisi: Why do men think it's OK to pee in outdoor public places that are not washrooms, whenever the need strikes? And yes, this is sexist because women don't just drop trou and let rip. We learn to pee before we leave and to hold it in. But that's not the point.

I get it that sometimes you've

just got to go, and it's not good for you to hold it. But how about some discretion? Can't you go deeper into the trees so no one can see you?

Where is their sense of decency and common courtesy?

Grossed out

Hear, hear! I totally agree! It's super cute to see little children peeing outside, in the park, or at the beach. It's offensive to see grown men doing the same.

Not only that, but it's filthy, smelly and bad for the environment (bangor.ac.uk/pee-responsibly). In Toronto, it's a crime that can carry up to a \$500 fine. There are bylaws specifically stating no urinating on public streets or in municipal parks.

To all the men out there — please remember that NO ONE wants to see you pee, so if you've got to go, and there isn't a washroom nearby, find a tree, a bush, whatever, but make sure that you are not in plain sight. Thanks in advance!

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