

Food and Wine

Bacon, sausage and duck confit make this rich dish perfect for a wintry day

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Comforting cassoulet is the perfect dish for a wintry day.



On these cold, dark, miserable winter days, nothing warms body and soul like a big, bubbling pot of cassoulet. “It’s just one of those ultimate comfort foods,” says Tobias Grignon, executive chef at Bistro Pastis and Le Parisien restaurants in Vancouver. “On a cold day, it sticks to your ribs. It’s so full of flavour and it’s very nourishing. It warms you right to your bones.”

Cassoulet is basically a very rich and savoury baked bean dish that is loaded with cured meats — bacon, sausage and duck or goose confit — and, depending on the recipe you follow, perhaps some roast lamb or pork.

It originated in the southwest of France, in the Languedoc region, and there is much heated debate over whether it came from Toulouse, Carcassone, or the small town of Castelnaudary, which claims to be the world capital of cassoulet.

In fact, Castelnaudary insists the bean dish was first served there during the siege of 1355, when defenders had to improvise with what little food they could find. It’s a romantic story, though sadly, unlikely to be true. What is true, though, is that Castelnaudary is home to The Brotherhood of the Universal Cassoulet Academy, and hosts a cassoulet festival each August.

“Cassoulet came from a very small place for such a big claim to fame,” says Christine van der Lieck, who, along with her husband John, owns Oyama Sausage on Granville Island. They hold their own cassoulet festival each November, and it, too, has become famous, in its own small way.

“Initially, we started it because November is very slow, and why not?” she says. “Now it’s become an icon and people start phoning us in September.

We dream beans for weeks afterwards,” she adds with a laugh.

This year, in addition to the confit and sausages that are available year round, Oyama Sausage also plans to sell the bean stew base throughout the winter because, as much as we

love cassoulet, it isn't exactly the sort of dish we can whip up after a long day at the office.

"Don't bother. Buy ours. Make your life easy," van der Lieck says.

Look up any of the traditional recipes and you'll see what she means.

Julia Child, for instance, suggests you make your own sausage and goose confit, add a roast pork loin and cook the beans with pork rind that you cut with shears. Anne Willan insists you include two kinds of roasted lamb and boil the bacon to remove any salt before adding it to the beans. As for the beans, Grignon says, "They probably have bar-room brawls over the right beans to use in that region."

According to tradition, cassoulet was made with a plump and creamy local white bean called "haricot Tarbais". (Cannellini, Great Northern, navy or flageolet beans also work just fine, though.)

Each week throughout the Languedoc, village women would mix those plentiful white beans with meaty leftovers in a big earthenware pot called a "c," which, of course, is where the name "cassoulet" originated. Then they'd take their pots of beans down to the communal oven and pop them in after the weekly bread was baked.

That was then. But even with all today's modern conveniences, cassoulet is still at least a two-day project, more if you plan to make your own duck confit, which is time-consuming, but a lot easier than you might think.

"It's simple," says Grignon. "It's a two-day process, but it's only 20 minutes of work."

Aside from that, he says, "Unless you're making cassoulet for a real aficionado from the region, you can skip 80 per cent of the steps. There's a lot of different ways to get the same results."

That's what he's done for the cassoulet he serves year round at Le Parisien and at Bistro Pastis in the winter months. And, he says, "They love it. People love the cassoulet." So does he. "The crust on the top when it comes out of the oven, it's bubbly and gently spitting at the sides. That brown crust, I don't get tired of looking at that," Grignon says. "And duck confit, sausage and bacon, what's not awesome about that?"

Cassoulet step by step

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When I decided to make a cassoulet for a dinner party, I had no idea what I was getting myself in for. But after reading dozens of recipes, many of them five or six pages long and each more complicated than the last, I was thoroughly confused and not a little bit intimidated. Yep, it was beginning to look like takeout pizza for the crowd. Luckily, I turned to Tobias Grignon, executive chef at Bistro Pastis and Le Parisien, who pointed out that most of those traditional recipes were developed for a region with very different ingredients and cooking styles. I mean, when's the last time you took a pot of beans down to the communal oven? As it turns out, making a cassoulet isn't difficult, but it does involve a number of steps that can take a fair bit of time. To make it easier, we've broken them down here so you can plan your cooking and shopping schedule.



One to two weeks before you plan to serve the cassoulet: Make the duck confit, keeping in mind that it is at least a two-day process. Note that you can always skip this step and purchase prepared duck confit instead.

Two days before: Soak the beans overnight.

The day before: Make the bean stew, then allow it to rest overnight.

Three to four hours before: Prepare the meats.

Two to 2 ½ hours before: Assemble the cassoulet. Preheat the oven.

About 90 minutes to two hours before: Place the cassoulet in the oven. About 10 to 20 minutes before dinner is served: Top cassoulet with breadcrumbs (optional).

Serve the cassoulet: Pair it with a bold red wine like a Cotes du Roussillon Villages (which comes from the same region) or a refreshing beer like a Czech Pilsner, and serve it with a crisp green salad dressed in a simple vinaigrette.