

# Oxtails On My Mind

My culinary repertoire was limited. Numerous attempts at disputing this fact had led me to the same irrevocable conclusion: I could not cook! Like any male in a predicament, I found it easy to lay blame on someone else.

My theory insisted that my failure to feed myself was a matter of genetics – similar to being born with a non-life threatening condition. My mother was a horrible cook, hated the kitchen passionately, and passed some remnant of this kitchen-hating gene to me.

For her, the kitchen was a mythical dragon ferociously protecting its lair, scorching *béchamel* sauce and overcooking pasta. I remember well the day the monster roasted her Thanksgiving turkey to a crisp cinder.

A stubborn woman, my mother was undeterred; she simply bought new pots and pans to replace the casualties of battle. She had a sizable stockpile of weaponry: eggbeaters and whisks, tall and slotted spoons, a meat grinder, a set of cookie cutters from France. In addition to her frying pans and stock pot, she had somehow acquired a gnocchi board, and rescued a rickety kitchen scale from someone's garbage heap. Mommy arrived at the front line battle-ready, scarcely anticipating her humiliation, never fully accepting defeat.

*The sound of a pot clanging on the stove. The slam of a cupboard door. The sound of Jack, our 8-year-old cocker spaniel, barking at the kitchen door.*

These were the signals that the battle had been joined. As a child, I hated these fights, because if she lost (which she often did), we would have sardines for dinner.

*As an adult, I still shiver whenever I walk through the canned food section at the supermarket.*

After migrating to the United States, I decided the time had come to slay the dragon of my childhood. I planned to cook oxtail stew, a dish I had grown to love thanks to my fellow Caribbean expatriates. My neighbors Matthew and Lisa Denali were from my hometown in Jamaica and, like an island breeze, invited themselves into my life. They lived in the apartment next to mine: with typical island hospitality, they welcomed me to America with smiles, kind words, and homemade goodies.

Coconut drops, cornmeal pudding, rice and peas, and Lisa's oxtail stew filled my small apartment with memories of lazy Sunday afternoons. Just opening one of their Tupperware containers gave me visions of swaying pimento trees and goats resting in the shade. Before the Denalis moved and were replaced by an aging spinster from Rhode Island, I never missed the opportunity to have dinner with them. Especially when Lisa was working her magic on a pot of cow's tail: the resulting stew seemed nothing short of enchantment.

Oxtail is categorized as offal: in layman's terms, the entrails and internal organs of a butchered animal. From a cultural standpoint, offal is "fifth quarter": those parts of an animal considered waste material and normally thrown away during the butchering process. Oxtail, as the name suggests, is a cow's tail that has been cleaned and cut into one- to two-inch disks of bone, meat, fat and gristle. Traditionally oxen, cows that had been neutered and used as beasts of burden, were the source of this delicacy.

Through periods of hunger and famine, butchers began to prepare oxtail from any bovine carcass that wandered through the *abattoir*. Creative cooks worldwide have used this muscular meat to create ethnic specialties, a tradition evidenced by oxtail's different variations. In Italy, it is the

main ingredient in *coda alla vaccinara*, a rich oxtail stew with vegetables and herbs, the meat braised in wine. Versions of oxtail soup are popular traditional dishes in Asian countries: the Philippines has *kare-kare*, with a thick, mellow peanut sauce enhanced with shrimp paste. Indonesia gives us *sop buntut*, a clear soup made by boiling the oxtail, vegetables and some aromatic spices. In Colombia, oxtail turns up in *sococho de cola*, prepared with plantains, corn, yucca, potatoes, and squash. In Brazil, it's *rabada ensopado*, in Korea, *kkori gomtang*; I call it delicious in any language.

After spending hours on the internet looking at recipes from around the world, I chose one from [jamaican-recipes.com](http://jamaican-recipes.com). It was straightforward and simple, with a Caribbean flair to it, and I liked the fact that it called for a pressure cooker.

*Not that I had any idea how to use that piece of equipment, but I was prepared to buy one.*

A pressure cooker can be dangerous in the wrong hands: it is noisy, cantankerous, and has been known to explode on occasion. Perfect – the heightened danger appealed to my combative nature, for indeed I was preparing for battle. Pressure cooker and recipe in hand... tomorrow, the dragon was going to die.

My best friend Nancy argued against this lunacy; she reminded me of my penchant for starting grease fires. She also recounted several other mishaps that had befallen my attempts at preparing a meal over the years.

*But I was resolute, and her pleas relented. I would cook my dish and it would be perfect; I would love it, and Nancy would, too.*

I had already gone to the supermarket and bought all the ingredients. Nancy had agreed to come for dinner tomorrow. She insisted on playing her part by supplying a bottle of Merlot for our repast. The thought struck me that the wine served a dual purpose: to celebrate as the drink to go with my accomplishment – or as a makeshift fire extinguisher.

My small apartment with an even smaller kitchen had never seen its occupant so busy. My shiny new cooker was out of the box and on the back burner of the stove. I had already dutifully washed my oxtails, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and put them in the pot, along with the other ingredients in the recipe.

For good measure, I had filled the pot to the brim with water, making sure the lid was sealed shut before turning the gauge on my electric stove to high. The dragon had been struck its first fatal blow; the pressure cooker was chugging and whistling as if happy, and I was watching it cook.

The doorbell chimed, and I untied my apron and hurried to open the door, expecting to see Nancy with my bottle of Merlot. Instead, I was greeted by dark brown eyes and my mother's glasses sitting atop a petulant nose.

*Imagine my shocked expression, as we stood facing each other in the doorway.*

The pressure cooker must have been clairvoyant, because at that moment it shrieked, rattled, shook, and emitted what sounded to my mom a familiar war cry. The dragon was rallying, returning to battle right here in my tiny kitchen.

Mommy charged into the kitchen, removed the cooker from the stove, placed it in the sink and turned on the faucet. The pot sighed audibly as the cold water caressed it. I brought up the rear

and stood sheepishly at the entrance to my kitchen as she expertly removed the lid and peered at the contents within.

“Give me a spoon,” she said, and scooped a little of the liquid and put it to her lips.

“Just a little more salt, a few sprigs of thyme, and I think we’ll be able to enjoy dinner in about twenty minutes.”

Looking around, she found a small pot in the cupboard and said, “If you give me an apron, I’ll cook some rice and fry some plantains to go with it.”

The kitchen became deathly quiet, and at that moment something happened between us. My mother had been preparing for just this moment all these years. My oxtail came out perfectly; and as she turned to face me with a wry smile, I could imagine the dragon lying dead on the floor at her feet.

*All these years, we had been missing one magical ingredient. We had found it in each other: love.*

Without saying it, we both knew that from this day a common bond would unite mother and son, a force so powerful that no monster could defeat it. Humming contentedly to myself, I turned and went to find an extra plate and silverware. There would be three of us for dinner tonight.