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Pot au feu

Serves 8

Preparation: 30 mins, plus soaking ham hock

Cooking: 2¼ hours

Special equipment: large stockpot

The quintessence of French family cuisine, this must be the most celebrated dish in France. It honours the tables of the rich and poor alike. Despite its lack of sophistication, it has survived the passage of time. Pot au feu is a triumph of simplicity and the inspiration for many other dishes, such as poule au pot, potée au choux, navarin, daubes, carbonnades and not forgetting the beautiful chicken soup. You can feast on it for several days.

Planning ahead You can prepare this dish a day or two in advance and keep it in the fridge, ready to reheat and serve as required.

1 ham hock, about 1kg, soaked in cold water in the fridge for 6 hours or overnight
500g flank of beef, outer fat removed
300g smoked streaky bacon, rind on
3 litres cold water
2 pinches of sea salt
1 bouquet garni (6 bay leaves, 10g parsley, 4g thyme, tied together)
20 black peppercorns
3 garlic cloves (unpeeled)
1 Morteau sausage, about 350g¹
1 marrow bone, about 400g (optional)

For the vegetables

1 Savoy cabbage, cut into 6 wedges, core retained
6 medium carrots (480g), peeled and quartered
2 celery stalks (120g), cut into thirds
2 large turnips (300g), peeled and halved
2 onions (300g), peeled and quartered, root left on

For the garnish

chopped flat-leaf parsley

To cook the meat and vegetables Place all the meat, except the Morteau sausage and marrow bone, in a large casserole. Pour on the cold water to cover, add the salt and slowly bring to the boil. Let bubble gently for 1 minute while skimming to remove the impurities².

Turn down to a gentle simmer, add the bouquet garni, peppercorns and garlic and cover with a lid, leaving a small gap³. Cook very gently, with one bubble just breaking the surface, for 1½ hours. Skim off most of the fat⁴, then add the Morteau sausage and marrow bone.

Blanch the cabbage wedges in boiling water for 3 minutes, then add to the pan with the rest of the vegetables. Cook very gently for a further 30 minutes or until the meat just starts to come away from the bone and the vegetables are soft but still holding their shape. Taste the liquor and correct the seasoning.

To serve You could simply serve the pot au feu straight from the casserole and let guests help themselves, but serving will be easier if you portion the meat in the kitchen. Divide the meat between warm soup plates, surround with the vegetables and pour on some of the cooking liquor. Sprinkle with chopped parsley and accompany with Dijon mustard, gherkins and a French baguette.

Variations Other cuts of meat, such as feather blade steak, shin of beef, lamb shank or pig's cheeks could be added to the dish at the start of cooking. Other root vegetables could be used, such as parsnips, swede, potatoes, celeriac etc.

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- ¹ This smoked French sausage from Morteau in Franche-Comté is probably the best quality sausage you can ever eat. It is strongly flavoured and densely textured. In fact, the flavour is so pronounced you could use the sausage alone in this pot au feu, doubling the quantity and leaving out the other meats, as I often do. Morteau sausage can be easily purchased online.
 - ² This clarification process coagulates the blood and impurities, which can then be skimmed away, producing a much clearer stock.
 - ³ The pot au feu must be simmered not boiled, otherwise the meat will become tough and the broth will turn very cloudy. When covering with a lid, it is important to leave a gap – if the lid is on tight, the heat will accumulate and the broth will boil.
 - ⁴ A little fat will improve and enhance the flavour of the broth, so I recommend that you do not skim all of it away. However, if you are determined to remove all the fat, the best way to do so is to allow the pot au feu to cool completely; the fat will then solidify on the surface of the liquor, making it easier to remove.

