



**Under the skin**  
Three casserole dishes  
to delight a nation  
of sausage lovers



GIZZI ERSKINE

What’s your favourite type of sausage casserole? This is a question that came up recently while I was enjoying a marvellous Italian sausage stew at a swanky restaurant with a friend, and we found that we had polarised views. While I prefer the traditional, British, onion-and-gravy-based variety, my friend is a diehard fan of the more Mediterranean, tomato-based version. Curious, I asked Twitter: “Sausage casserole: gravy or tomato-based?” The results came in even-stevens, but the question prompted an outpouring of sausage casserole musings. Some declared that it’s a dish that must be made in a slow cooker, others swore by making it with wine, while still others claimed cider works better. Several said they serve it with mash, some avowed using polenta, while a good few proclaimed that it’s best served with big, fat butter beans. That is how this column, which I had intended to be on hotpots, stews and braises, evolved into one dedicated to sausage casseroles.

Sausages are synonymous with Britishness and I think one of the reasons they’ve become so popular is that they’re cheap, durable and a little goes a long way. But we’re not the only nation that loves a sausage casserole — the Italians enjoy theirs with lentils and rosemary and the French have cassoulets, slow-cooked with white beans. In North Africa it’s commonplace to serve merguez — fiery lamb or beef sausages — alongside chicken stews and couscous, and in China they make their own stonkingly good sausage casserole variants in clay pots.

Nowadays, there’s a growing demand for sausages that are super meaty, but this new breed does nothing for me other than give me indigestion. Indeed, while I wouldn’t go for a sausage that’s less than 70% meat, the British banger does need bread filler to make it taste and feel like a sausage. In my book, the pure meat variety should be reserved for chorizo and merguez sausages.

So I’ve come up with three recipes that cover the basic sausage casserole categories, all pimped with modern twists. There’s a gravy-based one, a tomato-based one and an Anglo-Italian venison and lentil version. They just go to show how versatile this dish is ■

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**Sausage, tomato,  
caper and olive stew**

**Sausages in a tomato base give off pretty strong Italian vibes, so this stew really needs to be eaten with pasta or polenta. It’s something of a classic, but should still taste modern and delicious.**

**SERVES 4**  
**PREPARATION TIME: 20 MINUTES**  
**COOKING TIME: 50 MINUTES**

**1.** Heat half the oil in the pan. Add the sausages, brown all over and set aside. Add the rest of the oil, then fry the onion gently for 10 minutes until softened. Add the celery and garlic and fry for a further minute. Pour over the wine, tomatoes and herbs, then add the sausages to the pan and leave to cook over a very low heat for 30 minutes.

**2.** Add the capers, olives and basil for the last 10 minutes of cooking. Serve with really cheesy polenta, or over pasta topped with grated parmesan.

- 2 *tblsp* olive oil
- 8 *sausages* — *I love the Italian-style ones with fennel*
- 1 *onion*, finely chopped
- 1 *stalk of celery*, thinly sliced on a slight angle
- 4 *cloves of garlic*, finely chopped
- 200ml *white wine*
- 2 x 400g *tins of chopped plum tomatoes*
- Leaves from a few sprigs of thyme*
- 1 *bay leaf*
- 2 *tblsp capers in brine*, drained and rinsed
- 80g *good olives*, pitted and sliced — *I’d go with Castelvetrano, but use whichever you like*
- A *handful of fresh basil*



## Venison sausage and lentil casserole

Venison sausages are low in fat, big on flavour and go very well with lentils. This is a somewhat grown-up sausage casserole, with a hearty feel.

**SERVES 4**  
**PREPARATION TIME: 20 MINUTES**  
**COOKING TIME: 50 MINUTES**

1 tbsp olive oil	A few sprigs of thyme
8 venison sausages	10 juniper berries
4 slices of smoked bacon, loin meat	1 tsp tomato purée
8 medium shallots, peeled and cut in half	200g puy or green lentils
2 carrots, cut into chunks	300ml port
8 cloves garlic, peeled but left whole	1 pint of fresh chicken stock
A pinch of dried chilli flakes	1 tsp of redcurrant jelly
A sprig of rosemary	Small bunch of fresh parsley, roughly chopped



1. Heat the oil in a large casserole. Throw in the sausages and brown all over. Remove from the pan, add the bacon and fry for a minute or two. Add the shallots and garlic and fry for 5 minutes until the bacon is golden and becoming crisp. Add the chilli flakes, herbs and juniper berries and cook for a minute then add the tomato purée and cook for a further minute.

2. Pour in the lentils and stir, then cover with the port and stock. Bring to the boil, then turn down to a simmer. Add the sausages, cover and simmer for 30 minutes until the lentils have soaked up most of the stock and left a rich sauce. Stir in the redcurrant jelly and serve sprinkled with the parsley.



**TOP TIPS**  
Buy sausages from a good butcher as they'll be making them themselves, and most likely following a good old-fashioned recipe.



## Old-school sausage hotpot and root vegetable mash

This isn't any old sausage casserole — this recipe will give you super-sticky and rich gravy, just like the one that comes with the sausage and mash served at good gastro-pubs and restaurants.

**SERVES 4**  
**PREPARATION TIME: 10 MINUTES**  
**COOKING TIME: 40 MINUTES**

1. Heat the oven to 200C. Heat the oil in a casserole pan, add the sausages and fry until they are browned but not cooked through. Remove from the pan and set aside. Add the onions and fry slowly for 10 minutes or until they have fully softened and started to turn golden. Stir in the flour then cook out for 5 minutes. Pour over the cider, bring to the boil and cook for 2 minutes. Add the stock and herbs, place the lid on and pop in the oven for 35 minutes until bubbling and thick.

2. To make the mash, chop all the vegetables into small cubes and place in a pan of cold water. Gently boil for 20 minutes until cooked through. Drain and allow the vegetables to steam in the colander for 5 minutes. Mash with a potato masher or ricer, then add the butter, milk or cream, nutmeg and season with salt and pepper.

1 tbsp vegetable oil
8 good-quality, outdoor-reared pork sausages
3 onions, finely sliced
1 tbsp plain flour
200ml dry cider
500ml fresh beef stock (available in chiller cabinets at supermarkets)
A sprig of rosemary
A few sprigs of thyme
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
<b>FOR THE ROOT VEGETABLE MASH</b>
1 small celeriac
2 medium carrots, peeled
1 medium swede
2-3 tbsp butter
2 tbsp milk or cream
A grating of nutmeg

### Gizzi's Gadgets

I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

LE CREUSET CAST IRON CASSEROLE

From £92  
Made from cast iron, these radiate heat perfectly and effectively become an oven, so they're ideal for cooking beautiful stews and casseroles, either on the hob or in the oven. I started dreaming of owning a set when I was a teenager and I now collect them in teal — they come in an array of punchy colours.



## On the bottle

It's February — time to get back in the red



Although we have now cruised gratefully into February, I wrote this in the dying days of last month when I should have been grappling with the complexities of the online "government gateway" and doing my tax return. To add to my distress I hadn't touched a glass of wine since December 31, because I couldn't get my best winter trousers on and was undergoing a probably deeply unhealthy crash diet. It worked: I am now properly trousered — and desperate to get into good winter wine.

The bottles that haunted my imagination as I ground my way through January — here's a thought: why did my weight always spike on Thursdays and Sundays? — were warming, meaty reds. Nothing fussy or expensive, but showing effort, skill and imagination.

One I have found is deeply traditional and exceptionally good value. Two others are new products, or perhaps innovative variations on old themes. All are from southwest Europe and all are blends of different grapes, which taxes the ability of the winemakers.

Tempranillo is the workhorse of Rioja. Its soft leatheriness with a hint of strawberry is a giveaway to blind-tasters. In Beronia's Rioja Reserva 2008 it's mixed with two other varieties: graciano for spiciness and mazuelo for backbone. Intriguingly (to me, anyway) mazuelo is the same grape as southern France's ubiquitous carignan; and when tempranillo crosses into Portugal it becomes tinta roriz, which is in my second wine, Altitude by Duorum 2011. It's blended with the Portuguese workhorse, touriga nacional, and its sidekick, touriga franca.

The third wine, Domaine de Cassaigne 2011 from over the Pyrenees in Gascony, is a much more familiar blend: merlot, syrah and cabernet sauvignon. It's made by a co-op in an area steeped in tradition yet shouts "new world" at the top of its voice ■

### THREE OF THE BEST



**BERONIA RIOJA RESERVA 2008**  
Soft fruit, spices, armchairs, saddles, cigar boxes — lovely (£12.99, Waitrose)



**ALTITUDE BY DUORUM 2011**  
From a newish winery in the Douro, port territory, it is plush with porty prune flavours and incense (£12.99, Sunday Times Wine Club)



**DOMAINE DE CASSAIGNE 2011**  
Blackberries, pepper and a well-judged dose of tannin — the latest from the restless Producteurs Plaimont co-operative, who disprove the myth of somnolent rural France (£9.99, Rude Wines)