

The Ultimate Steak Sauce

Could we bring the ultra-rich flavor and glossy consistency of a classic French demi-glace to steak sauce without spending all day roasting bones and reducing stock?

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

It's easy enough to finish a seared steak with a quick pan sauce or a knob of flavored butter, but anyone who's dined in a fine French restaurant knows that nothing compares to a sauce made with the ultra-savory, full-bodied reduction known as demi-glace. The preparation has been a hallmark of haute cuisine since the days of the 19th-century French chef Auguste Escoffier, and chefs trained in classic French technique tend to keep a supply on hand not only to dress up steak, but as a meaty flavor foundation for soups, sauces, and sautés.

But making demi-glace is another matter. The time-consuming process is really only feasible in a restaurant kitchen. The process in a nutshell: Veal bones are roasted for a couple of hours with aromatics; the roasting pan is deglazed, releasing all the flavorful browned bits that will help enrich the stock; the whole works are transferred to a stock pot with wine and several quarts of water where it all gurgles gently for at least six hours. The stock is then strained and reduced to an ultra-concentrated, glossy, silky essence.

I wasn't about to delve into such fussy work in my own kitchen. But this rich, velvety sauce is too good to be left only to restaurant chefs. Surely with some experimenting I could find a shortcut.

Cutting Corners

The test kitchen already has a good technique for pan-searing steaks (our preferred cuts are strip and rib-eyes), so I immediately got to work on the demi-glace. I started by browning carrot, onion, and garlic chunks in a Dutch oven before deglazing with a little red wine and beef broth. Once the mixture had boiled down and thickened a bit, I took a taste. The result wasn't terrible, but its flavor was thin and it had no real body to speak of—hardly something that could stand as the backbone to a sauce.

I had one quick idea for amping up the flavor: In a traditional demi-glace, the vegetables are usually cut into large chunks, which break down and release



Our quick demi-glace makes a rich, silky base for countless pan sauces.

flavor over the course of roasting and simmering. But since I needed big flavor fast, I pulsed the aromatics in the food processor until they were roughly chopped, figuring their increased surface area would offer more opportunity for flavorful browning. I also added mushrooms and tomato paste (another component common in traditional demi-glace), knowing that both ingredients' meat-mimicking glutamates would increase the savory flavor. Sure enough, this batch—which I further enhanced with thyme, bay leaves, and peppercorns; then deglazed with red wine and a quart of beef broth; and reduced for about 25 minutes—showed definite flavor improvement. But it still didn't win over my tasters. Even after I'd worked this latest version into a classic herb pan sauce, they unenthusiastically pushed pieces of steak around in the still-thin reduction. My faux base still wasn't fooling anybody.

Building a Semi-Demi

There was no doubt what was missing: Without the meatiness and unctuous gelatin given up by roasted veal bones, my attempt would never be as savory or silky-textured as the real deal. I was at a loss for my next move, when a colleague reminded me of

a similar conundrum when we tried to make full-bodied chicken soup without the time-consuming step of slow-simmering a chicken carcass. Our secret there? Ground chicken. The choice actually makes a lot of sense, as the goal with any stock is to extract as much flavor from the meat as possible—and the finer the bits, the quicker the flavor is extracted. Figuring the same principle would apply here, I grabbed a half pound of ground beef and browned it along with tomato paste for about 10 minutes before adding the vegetables. This was the breakthrough I'd been looking for: Though still not as full-bodied as I'd like, this base more than hinted at the flavor of roasted bones.

The consistency issue was a little trickier. Calves' bones are particularly rich in collagen, which prolonged roasting and simmering breaks down into rich gelatin. Even when I reduced my base to a near-syrupy consistency, the effect wasn't at all the same. But I did have something in my kitchen cupboard that might

EQUIPMENT UPDATE Wine Openers

Lever-style corkscrews are designed to use leverage rather than muscle power to pull the cork, but many such models are unwieldy and bulky. We wanted a wine opener that could cleanly and effortlessly remove any type of cork, took minimal cajoling (the fewer steps, the better), and fit neatly in a drawer. So we gathered 17 models ranging from \$8 to \$100—everything from lever-style openers to waiter's corkscrews

(in which the lever rests on one side of the lip of the bottle), twisting pull models, and winged designs—and opened cases of wine until we narrowed our choices



POP THE CORK

The Oggi Nautilus Corkscrew tackled a variety of corks with ease.

to seven. That lineup did not include our previous winner, the Screwpull Trigger (\$99.59), which lost out to models that were at least as intuitive, more compact, and far less expensive. After wine-opening novices and experts alike test-drove our finalists on both natural and synthetic corks, the sleek, economical, lever-style Oggi Nautilus Corkscrew (\$24.99) was dubbed the premier pick. And at a fraction of the cost of our old favorite, we had more to spend on a good bottle. For complete results, go to www.CooksIllustrated.com/apr11. —Taizeth Sierra



Watch This Sauce Take Shape

Video available FREE for 4 months at www.CooksIllustrated.com/apr11

help: powdered gelatin. I stirred two packages into the final reduction (after straining the solids) and boiled it down to half a cup. As I'd hoped, this was all it took to turn my quick demi-glace silky and viscous.

This time, when I worked the base into my final steak sauces—fresh herbs, brandy with green peppercorns, and port wine were our favorites—my tasters mopped up every last drop. Admittedly, classically trained French chefs might be able to tell the difference between my “semi demi” and the true approach—but I'd bet they'd still want the recipe.

SAUCE BASE

MAKES ½ CUP

NOTE: The sauce base recipe yields more than called for in the steak recipe; leftovers can be refrigerated for up to 3 days or frozen for up to one month. Our preferred brands of beef broth are Rachael Ray Stock-in-a-Box and College Inn Bold Stock.

- 1 small onion, peeled and cut into rough ½-inch pieces
- 1 small carrot, peeled and cut into rough ½-inch pieces
- 8 ounces cremini mushrooms, stems trimmed and caps wiped clean and halved
- 2 medium garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 8 ounces 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 cups dry red wine
- 4 cups low-sodium beef broth (see note)
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 teaspoons whole black peppercorns
- 2 packages (5 teaspoons) unflavored powdered gelatin

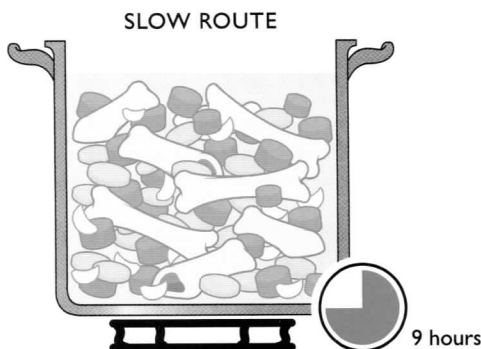
1. Process onion, carrot, mushrooms, and garlic in food processor into ⅛-inch pieces, 10 to 12 one-second pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

2. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering; add beef and tomato paste and cook, stirring frequently, until beef is well browned, 8 to 10 minutes. Add vegetable mixture and cook, stirring occasionally, until any exuded moisture has evaporated, about 8 minutes. Add wine and bring to simmer, scraping bottom of pan with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits. Add beef broth, thyme, bay leaves, and peppercorns; bring to boil. Reduce heat and gently boil, occasionally scraping bottom and sides of pot and skimming fat from surface, until reduced to 2 cups, 20 to 25 minutes.

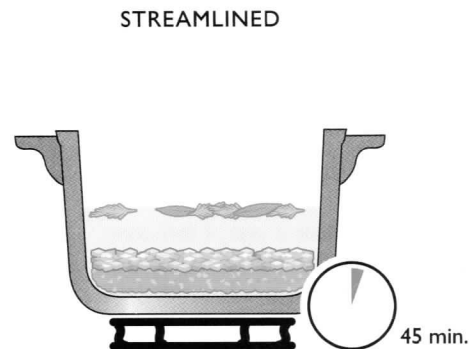
3. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer set over small saucepan, pressing on solids with rubber spatula to extract as much liquid as possible (you should have about 1 cup stock). Sprinkle gelatin over stock and stir to dissolve. Place saucepan over medium-high heat and bring stock to boil. Gently boil, stirring occasionally, until reduced to ½ cup, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove from heat and cover to keep warm.

Two Routes to Super-Rich Sauce

Traditional French demi-glace relies on veal bones for its flavor and takes a full day to prepare. Our modern approach substitutes ground beef and gelatin and dramatically shortcuts the process.



COOKING STEP	TIME
ROAST veal bones and large chunks of vegetables big enough to hold their shape during the long simmering.	1 hour
SIMMER bones and vegetables in stock pot with water and wine until flavor is extracted and collagen from bones turns into unctuous, sauce-thickening gelatin.	6 hours
REDUCE strained stock slowly until glossy and concentrated.	2 hours



COOKING STEP	TIME
BROWN ground beef and finely chopped aromatics (which release flavor quickly) with glutamate-rich tomato paste and mushrooms.	20 min.
SIMMER this potent flavor base in Dutch oven with wine and broth.	20 min.
REDUCE strained stock, adding powdered gelatin for silkiness and viscosity.	5 min.

PAN-SEARED STEAKS WITH HERB SAUCE

SERVES 4

NOTE: We like this sauce with strip or rib-eye steaks, but it will work with any type of pan-seared steak.

Steaks

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 4 boneless strip or rib-eye steaks, 1 to 1¼ inches thick (about 8 ounces each) (see note)
- Table salt and ground black pepper

Herb Sauce

- 1 small shallot, minced (about 2 tablespoons)
- ½ cup white wine
- ¼ cup Sauce Base (½ recipe)
- ¼ teaspoon white wine vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons minced fresh chives
- 1½ teaspoons minced fresh parsley leaves
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh tarragon leaves
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- Table salt and ground black pepper

1. **FOR THE STEAKS:** Heat oil in 12-inch heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Meanwhile, pat steaks dry with paper towels and season both sides with salt and pepper. Lay steaks in pan, leaving ¼ inch between them. Cook, not moving steaks, until well browned, about 4 minutes. Using tongs, flip steaks and continue to cook until instant-read thermometer inserted in center registers 120 degrees for rare to medium-rare, 3 to

7 minutes. Remove steaks to platter and tent loosely with foil while preparing herb sauce.

2. **FOR THE HERB SAUCE:** Return now-empty skillet to medium-low heat; add shallot and cook, stirring constantly, until lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Add wine and bring to simmer, scraping bottom of pan with wooden spoon to loosen browned bits. Add ¼ cup Sauce Base, vinegar, and any accumulated juices from steak; return to simmer and cook until slightly reduced, about 1 minute. Off heat, whisk in chives, parsley, tarragon, and butter; season with salt and pepper to taste. Spoon sauce over steaks and serve immediately.

PAN-SEARED STEAKS WITH BRANDY AND GREEN-PEPPERCORN SAUCE

Follow recipe for Pan-Seared Steaks with Herb Sauce, substituting brandy for white wine and red wine vinegar for white wine vinegar. Omit chives, parsley, tarragon, and butter. In step 2, add ¼ cup heavy cream, 2 tablespoons rinsed green peppercorns, and ¼ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme to skillet along with Sauce Base and vinegar.

PAN-SEARED STEAKS WITH PORT WINE SAUCE

Follow recipe for Pan-Seared Steaks with Herb Sauce, substituting ruby port for white wine and balsamic vinegar for white wine vinegar. Substitute ¼ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme for chives, parsley, and tarragon