

IN LIKE A LAMB

Winter weather is certainly inspiration to put satisfying braised meats, like lamb shanks, on the menu—but so is the cut's adaptability and gentle cost.

BY KATHERINE BRYANT

THIS TIME OF YEAR means switching to a bold style of cooking where you take your time and work for richer, heartier dishes," says Duane Keller, chef at Washington D.C.'s Potowmack Landing restaurant. And Keller doesn't hesitate to point out that lamb shanks are perfectly suited for this style. "They're all about stick-to-your-ribs, slow cooking."

Keller's lamb shanks (\$22) are prepared in a fairly traditional manner—braised with thyme, shallots, pinot noir, and veal stock until they're meltingly tender. He accompanies the shanks with baby beet risotto and sautéed garlicky spinach, and the dish has proven so popular, he included it on his New Year's Eve menu. "It has universal appeal. Men like it. Women like it. Everyone likes it," he says.

And Keller likes the fact that the shanks are an affordable alternative to today's pricey beef. With the U.S. Department of Agriculture reporting an 11% boost

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BONING UP: A slow braise boosted with garlic, fennel, oranges, and red wine is a smart way to cook lamb shanks.

in beef prices in 2004, many places are menuing less expensive center-of-the-plate alter-

natives. "The secondary meats definitely help keep price points down," he says. "And they turn out really well if you have the knowledge to pull it off." Keller will offer the shanks until the spring, when rack of lamb will take its place on the menu.

Another chef finding success with traditionally cooked lamb shanks is Mauro Golmarvi of Seattle's Assaggio (average check \$42). His Agnello Marchigiana (\$21.95), composed of braised lamb shanks, fresh herbs, and Italian plum tomatoes, is slowly cooked at 350°F for five hours. The flavorful, fork-tender shanks are the No. 2 seller at this upscale Italian restaurant. Unfortunately, that meant they frequently sold out early in the evening. To avoid disappointed diners, Golmarvi came up with the idea of having guests reserve a shank order or two by calling in ahead of time. Problem solved.

Other chefs are capitalizing on the versatility of shanks by offering ethnic takes. Jason Weiner, chef at the French bistro, Almond (average check \$40), in Bridgehampton, NY, offers a Moroccan Lamb Shank

RECIPE

Braised Lamb Shanks

12 lamb shanks
6 tbsp. vegetable oil
3 tbsp. butter
12 fresh thyme sprigs
4½ cups chopped onions
3 cups chopped carrots
3 cups chopped parsnips
4 heads garlic, unpeeled, halved
3 cups dry red wine
3¾ qt. chicken stock
3 oranges, peeled and quartered
6 cinnamon sticks
3 tbsp. fennel seeds, crushed
3 fennel bulbs, sliced
2 tbsp. grated orange peel

1. Season lamb with salt and pepper. Brown lamb in hot oil; transfer to roasting pans.

2. Add 3 tbsp. butter to drippings. Sauté thyme, onions, carrots, parsnips, and garlic until soft. Add wine; boil until reduced. Add stock, oranges, cinnamon, and seeds; boil.

3. Pour vegetable mixture over shanks. Braise lamb, uncovered, in 375°F oven 2¼ hr. until tender, basting often.

4. Strain braising liquid; skim fat. Pour liquid into pot. Add fresh fennel, orange peel, and remaining fennel seeds. Cook 15 min.; pour sauce on shanks.
Yield: 12 servings.

