Chef’s Log 22 December 2009
Choucroute — Alsatian Comfort Food

Choucroute is comfort food. Not American, but French/German from Alsace. Pretty basic stuff. Meats and sauerkraut, with a minimum of spicing, served with great mustard and good beer.

The recipe for choucroute, such as it is, is pretty idiosyncratic, and everyone has an individual favorite. Mine follows. I make these in great big vats, 20 pounds at a time … you may wish to scale back.

12 pounds fresh (bagged) sauerkraut, optionally drained, doubly optionally rinsed
2 pounds butcher shop German sausages, bratwurst and weiss wurst
2 pounds smoked ham, cut into slices about ¾ inch thick, then cut into pieces about 2” by 4”
2 pounds smoked pork chops, 4 thick chops, cut in half diagonally
¾ pound smoked bacon, preferably slab you cut yourself or extra thick cut
1 smoked ham hock, about 2 or 2 ½ pounds
2 Vidalia onions, thick sliced
4 large cooking apples (firm and flavorful, Mutsus or Cortlands)
2 bags (maybe 3 pounds total) small red potatoes
2 tablespoons whole dried juniper berries
1 tablespoon black pepper corns
4-6 dried bay leaves
1 bottle white wine (good enough to drink but not good enough to impress company!)

Start by slicing the onions, peeling and cutting the apples in sixths, and slicing the ham, bacon, and pork chops.
When everything is ready, lightly fry the bacon, not until crisp but until translucent. Use the fat from the bacon to sauté the onions, only until soft. Prick the sausages so they don’t explode and boil them until done. Boil the ham hock until soft enough to slice into pieces between a quarter and a half a pound. Boil the potatoes until just about soft enough to eat.

Now assemble the choucroute in layers. You are not going to be able to stir this … so make sure that at each depth you have some ham, some ham hock, some sausage, some potato, some bacon … with sauerkraut above and below, of course. Pour in the entire bottle of white wine. (Some chefs, especially in Montreal, prefer to use an inexpensive bottle of champagne, with another bottle saved to drink with the choucroute, but I think this is better cooked with white wine and served with beer.) Cook over low heat until boiling, and then allow to simmer until the apples are cooked, maybe an hour or two. This is not rocket science. This is not even making a soufflé.

This can be divided off into small batches and reheated. It also freezes well. Actually, everything freezes well. More to the point, this thaws well too.

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