

St. Patrick's Day is just around the corner. All the grocery stores will be carrying corned beef very soon. It's interesting that most of it will be gone in a few weeks and none will replace it for almost a year.

Why corned beef? Why corned beef and cabbage?

To tell the truth it's not an Irish tradition. It's an Irish-American tradition. In Ireland you would more likely find a stew made with lamb and root vegetables. More about that later.

First, what is corned beef? Where's the corn?

Well there is no corn. That reference comes from the large crystals of salt once used to cure the beef resembled corn. The blend of salt and spices produced what was really pickled beef. The meat was salted and seasoned and held through the winter. It was usually served at Easter.

It seems that the name "corned beef" makes for better marketing. In the South we might prove that theory wrong. Perhaps we could sell it beside the jars of pickled eggs and pig's feet. Then again ...

The cut of beef most often used is brisket. It is taken from the front part of the cow – just above the leg. It's meat that lies over the breastbone. It's that big lump that cows lie on. Due to being taken from this part of the cow and the salting, corned beef brisket passes Kashrut qualifications.

Once trimmed the brisket is often separated into its two parts for curing and marketing. The first cut is rectangular and less fatty. The end or point cut is the other choice. Brisket is the same cut that folks from Texas use for their barbecue.

The salt now used to cure the brisket is brine. It is highly spiced. You usually find bay leaves and mustard seed. A hotter version will add red pepper.

Potassium nitrite is added to commercial preparations of corned beef. That is what fixes the bright pink color. This color does not cook out. The meat will be done and still be pink.

The safest way to cook corned beef is braising or boiling. The meat should be very tender. If there is any question of "doneness," use a thermometer. If it reads 160, you will have zapped everything.

A slow cooker also works well with corned beef. It will tender in 8 to 10 hours. Your oven is another alternative. Baked at 350 in about an inch of water, the corned beef will be tender but firmer than boiling.

Don't think about your microwave. It will work but won't produce the best result.

Another safety factor – good and bad – is the salt. Just because the meat has been cured, it hasn't been cooked. Once you have opened the package, get to cooking. If you must store the meat, wash away the salt liquid. It spoils quickly. You can save washed spices for the cooking process.

By the way, if you take corned beef, rub some pepper on and smoke it, you have pastrami.

Let's talk about some practical recipes for your feast at home.

For me cooking the meat separately is the best choice. Don't try to cook the cabbage with the meat. In fact we steam our cabbage at Jimmy's. We add a few slices of bacon to give it a slight smoky overtone.

We serve our corned beef with steamed cabbage and braised potatoes and carrots. All of these are cooked separately.

If you want to make a stew or something akin to a New England boiled dinner, you can add root veggies toward the end of the cooking process. They will absorb flavor from the cooking liquid. You can add cabbage wedges but I would rather steam that alone.

You can also cook your corned beef in a foil pouch. It's an easy and clean way to cook. If you want something a little sweet, add onions, orange slices and dried fruit – like prunes or apricots – to the pouch. Cook at 350 for around 3 hours. If you want a glaze, open the pouch and coat the contents with a brown sugar and orange juice mixture. Bake until it bubbles.

In fact a glaze can be used to make an oven-braised version very nice indeed. The same sort of thing you would do to a baked ham works

here. Use brown sugar and mustard and brown a few minutes. Slice to serve.

A nice trick for your slow cooker is to use apple juice or cider for the liquid. A little orange peel and sweeter spice like clove and all spice can add another dimension to your corned beef.

If you are boiling yours, consider using new spices. This will give you a better-seasoned liquid. All you need are pickling spice, bay, peppercorns, thyme and mustard seed. Add some crushed red pepper for some more heat, if you wish.

What about that stew? It's easy. Brown cubes of beef or lamb and then simmer until tender in a liquid made from Guinness or Abita Turbo Dog, red wine, stock and some tomato paste. Thyme, bay, garlic, onion, salt and pepper go in too.

You can cook the veggies in the stew or separately and add toward the end for the best result.

Could you use corned beef? Yes, but the colors wouldn't work. If you want to try it, use a light colored beer and white wine and skip the tomato. Then you will have a flavorful simmered version of corned beef with a tasty stock and good veggies. In fact this could be the best way of all.

Go ahead and try making corned beef. The leftovers are great. Corned beef hash is mighty good and so are corned beef sandwiches. Your Jewish grandmother would be proud of you.