

## **Excerpt from *Year of the Cow* by Jared Stone**

My job may be a hot ball of stress dipped in anxiety and amphetamines, but my weekends are wonderlands of culinary experimentation. As I explore the beef that occupies my freezer, I realize that dealing with connective tissue is a major consideration. More than only thinking about it when I make a pot roast—connective tissue is a constant that I face with every cut in some capacity or another. It isn't something I can skip or evade or put off—it has to be dealt with. Since the two largest primals, chuck and round, contribute tremendously to moving the animal around—they are hunks of legs, after all—they have correspondingly large amounts of connective tissue, which is decidedly not delicious.

Connective tissue comes in two main types—elastin and collagen. Elastin is, oddly enough, elastic. It's the reason, for example, that skin snaps back into place after it's been pinched. It usually forms in thick bands and is fairly obvious to the eye.

Collagen, on the other hand, generally forms in threads between the muscle fibers themselves, though those threads can be quite thick in places. It's also an ingredient commonly added to lotions and beauty creams for the purpose of making them more expensive. (Also, it might decrease signs of aging. But mostly the first thing.)

When a piece of meat is cooked in a liquid at relatively low temperatures for a long period of time—that is, braised—the collagen in the meat transforms into another type of protein: gelatin. This aptly named protein is a powerful gelling agent and is the primary ingredient in Jell-O, as well as many similarly textured foods.

In a pot roast or other braise, this gelatin thickens whatever flavorful liquid the roast is cooked in, resulting in a sauce with a smooth, lovely mouthfeel. It's the reason why chefs boil bones when they're making soup and why enthusiastic amateurs boil bones when they're making pho. This transformation is a really remarkable bit of culinary alchemy—turning chewy, unappetizing collagen into rich, gorgeous sauces. Making lowly, tough cuts of meat into something divine.

From a chemical standpoint, the liquid that the roast is braised in isn't important so long as there is enough water content to facilitate the conversion of collagen into gelatin. From a culinary standpoint, it's nice to choose a liquid that compliments the dish. Beef stock is an obvious choice. It doubles down on the beefy goodness already present in the cut. Wine is lovely—it adds a little acid and then turns a little sweet during the process while most of the alcohol and some of the water evaporates out, condensing the sugars. Some chili recipes braise in beer and water. Some classic pork recipes braise in milk. Or, in the South—Coca-Cola.

I try them all. Pot roasts become my go-to weekend dish. I have a free Sunday afternoon? Pot roast. No plans for dinner? Pot roast. Extra long commercial break? You bet that's a pot roast. Solid experimental proof of the Higgs boson? Pot. Roast.

One fine Saturday evening, my wife is invited to a drag queen Tupperware party. This is, I'm told, a Tupperware party hosted by a drag queen—and not, as I initially supposed, an opportunity to ensure that one's drag queen remains refrigerator fresh. With Summer in Eagle Rock catching dinner storage and a show, I'm staying home with Declan. Just the two of us. Guy's night.

It's the first night Declan and I have had alone together for quite a while. I'm usually running hither and yon, pulled in a thousand different directions, working on a million different things. Dec is usually getting ready for bed by the time I get home. But not tonight. Tonight we can do anything we want.

And guys gotta eat.

Declan is almost two years old. A few times while I was cooking, he's brought a chair over and tried to help. I gave him some carrots to "hold for me," as there was never really anything he could actually do to pitch in. But tonight, that changes. Tonight, Daddy and Dec have a mission. Tonight, we're making stew. Appropriate for the evening, as a stew is just a pot roast in a wig. More liquid than a braise, but the same process underneath. Moisture. Low heat. Long time.

I'm going to let Declan take the reins of the project. We'll use all his favorite foods and let him do as much of the prep work as is possible. Nothing with knives or heat, of course, but that doesn't mean he can't wrangle some veggies. Maybe lots of veggies.

I prep the accoutrements I think we'll need—an assortment of stew meat, some stock, and all the vegetation we could find in the fridge. And, because we're a couple of dudes making stew—bacon. Lots of bacon.

I pull a chair over for Declan so he can sit at the counter and work with me, and I hand him a clove of garlic to peel. Unencumbered by civilized notions of proper sanitation, he ignores the chair, taking a seat on the floor next to the compost bowl, and begins to peel the garlic. I watch him for a moment, debating whether I should make him move to the counter.

Nah. Don't put your rules on me, man. It's Guy's Night.

Alright, I can do this. I take a seat on the floor next to him, and likewise begin peeling garlic. My enormous Rhodesian Ridgeback, always entranced by any sort of edible matter whatsoever, lopes over and sprawls out behind me. We make a happy threesome on the floor. I'm okay with the dubious hygiene of the situation. It shouldn't cause any food safety issues in this particular case—and this isn't a meal for guests. This is a meal just for us. I'm careful to keep our veggies off the tiles and away from the dog; still, if my wife were to walk in and see this, she'd have a stroke.

Silence falls, as we focus on our tasks. Declan has never peeled garlic before, and his fine motor skills are still developing. But he's diligent. I think he's happy that he gets to participate. With fat, stubby fingers, he delicately removes flake after flake of garlic skin.

I'm the first to break the silence. "So, how you been, buddy?"

"I'm peeling!"

"You certainly are, my friend. You certainly are."

We finish the garlic, and move on to peeling halves of an onion. This one is fun. Declan is painstakingly careful to peel only the very top layer of the onion, and nothing more. Again, delicate. Deliberate. Focused.

"Wow, you're really doing a good job, buddy. Working hard over there."

He beams. I melt a little inside. Finally, he hands me back an onion as pristine as if I had peeled it myself.

"More, Daddy?"

I look around. The rest of the veggies require tools. Metal tools, like vegetable peelers, that might scrape clumsy, not-quite-two-year-old fingers.

“More?” He eyes the carrots, hopeful.

“Can you be very, very careful?”

“I careful,” he insists.

“Okay,” I relent, handing him a carrot and the vegetable peeler. “Careful.”

“Careful. Carrot. Careful.” Like a tiny surgeon, he delicately pantomimes peeling the carrot, removing perhaps a nanometer of skin with each stroke. Whispering to himself, “Careful. Careful.”

I reposition the peeler in his hand, showing him more explicitly how it works. A moment of instruction later, he’s legitimately peeling a carrot. Slowly, and in tiny strips, but he’s doing it.

“Good work, buddy.”

“Careful, careful,” he responds. I pull out a paring knife and start peeling the potatoes.

Vegetables prepped, I survey our mise en place, such as it is. Of course, today half of it’s on the floor, so I try to arrange my cooking area into some sort of order. I like to cook in an organized workspace; I find that it helps counteract my intermittent bouts of flamboyant stupidity. I have my onions, carrots, garlic, potatoes, and—off to one side—the stew beef. We can do better.

“Hey, D. What else do you want in your stew?”

He looks up. “I want peas.”

“Peas?”

“I want peas, Daddy.” I don’t frequently cook with peas. The sight of them gives my wife “the vapors,” as she is wont to declare while fanning herself when affecting the

accent of her antebellum roots. I'm not nuts about them either, but Declan is absolutely mad for them. He eats his weight in peas about every two weeks.

Summer isn't here. And I'm letting Declan call the shots tonight. "Peas it is!" I say, headed to the fridge.

"Yay!" he replies.

"Yay!" I echo. "Guy's night!"

"Guy Nye!"

I dice some bacon. Some. A reasonable amount. Organization is great, but tonight measuring is for chumps. Tonight is relaxing and free. I throw the bacon into my Dutch oven and cook it until it's crisp. Then I remove the lardons and sear the beef in the bacon fat.

"This is gonna be good stew, dude."

"Yeah. Stew dude!" Declan laughs. So do I.

I pull the beef, toss in the onions, and sweat them until they begin to soften. I toss a little flour into the bacon fat to make something like a roux. Then stock, bay leaf, fresh thyme. I bring it all to a boil, then return the meat to the pot, drop the heat to low and put a lid on it.

Declan and I retire to the television parlor to watch a show in which things blow up in an educational manner. Thirty minutes later, we return to the kitchen, and Declan helps me add the carrots and potatoes to our stew.

"Careful, careful," he intones.

Another fortyish minutes later, veggies are soft, and the meat is like butter. I add the bacon back in. And, finally, the peas.

“Peas!” Declan exclaims.

I give the peas five minutes in the liquid to heat through, and then ladle two bowls for Declan and me. We sit down at the dining room table, and I offer a toast to my almost-two-year-old son.

“Thanks for hanging out with me, buddy.”

“Cheers!” He raises his glass, leaning awkwardly across the table to make triple sure the glasses touch, otherwise—by toddler logic—it doesn’t count. I grin. This is fun.

“Declan, we should definitely do this more often.” This sort of moment with my son is all too rare. Precious. Special. Right now, I’m acutely aware he won’t be this age forever. But running from place to place, checking items off to-do lists and performing the necessary maintenance duties of our daily lives, it’s easy to forget.

“Peas!” he yells, plunging a fat, plastic spoon into his stew.

Peas. And thank you.