

LAMB SHANKS AND PRUNE TAGINE

Serves 4 to 6

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from a Moroccan cookbook.

First of all, tagine¹ (see Notes at end) simply means a slow-cooked stew made with meat or poultry and spices. Vegetables, olives, and/or dried fruit such as prunes can be added. The flavor is typically rich and spicy. Tagines are often served with couscous, but spooning the stew over cooked rice is an alternative that appeals to me. I like rice.



Ingredients:

2 tablespoons olive oil for frying
2 tablespoons butter
3 to 4 lamb shanks, about 1½ pounds (680g) each²
1 large (12 ounces/340g) yellow onion; chopped into large pieces
2 medium cloves garlic; minced
½ cup (118ml) water
1 cup (237ml) stock (chicken, beef, turkey, vegetable, but not fish); preferably homemade³
1 generous pinch saffron threads (or ⅛ teaspoon turmeric)
½ teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
4 springs fresh coriander (cilantro), tied together
Zest of 1 lemon; divided, preferably in long threads (chiffonade)
Juice of 1 lemon
About 11 ounces (300g) pitted prunes
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon sesame seeds; toasted

Directions:

Place a heavy-based saucepan/dutch oven over medium-high flame and add the oil and butter. Add the lamb and brown on all sides. Transfer the lamb to a plate and set aside.

Add the onion and cook until tender and translucent, about 5 minutes. Use a wooden spoon to loosen the fond (all those delicious brown bits) from the bottom of the pan. Add the minced garlic, give it a stir, and then add the stock, saffron, ginger, cinnamon, pepper, and coriander sprigs. Stir well and add the browned lamb. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 1 hour, turning the lamb over after 30 minutes.

Add half the lemon zest (retaining the other half for garnish), cover and simmer for 30 minutes.

Add the lemon juice, prunes, and honey, cover and simmer for an additional 30 minutes, until the lamb is very tender. Meanwhile, toast the sesame seeds in a skillet. Remove and set aside for garnish.

Discard the coriander sprigs (if you can find them). Adjust sauce for salt. Serve hot with couscous or over steamed rice. Garnish with toasted sesame seeds and lemon zest on the side (more for eye appeal than as something to eat).

The **Step By Step** guide begins on the following page.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



A friend of mine found lamb shanks in a grocery store down in the city. Although I made this recipe once before, with boneless lamb pieces, I wanted to try it the way it was originally written.

2



Put the butter and oil in a large heavy pan. I'm using one of my enameled cast iron dutch ovens here. Heat over a medium-high flame. When the fat comes up to temperature, add the shanks and brown on both sides. If you have a smaller pan, brown two at a time.

3



Here's is my browned lamb. Remove from the pan and set aside.

4



While the lamb is browning, chop the onion. I cut large pieces because this is more appropriate for a stew. A tagine is a stew.

5



Place the chopped onion in the pan. Do not remove the fat or the delicious brown bits, the fond, as they will add flavor to the finished dish. Sauté the onion over medium heat until tender and translucent, about 5 minutes. Then add the garlic and cook less than a minute.

6



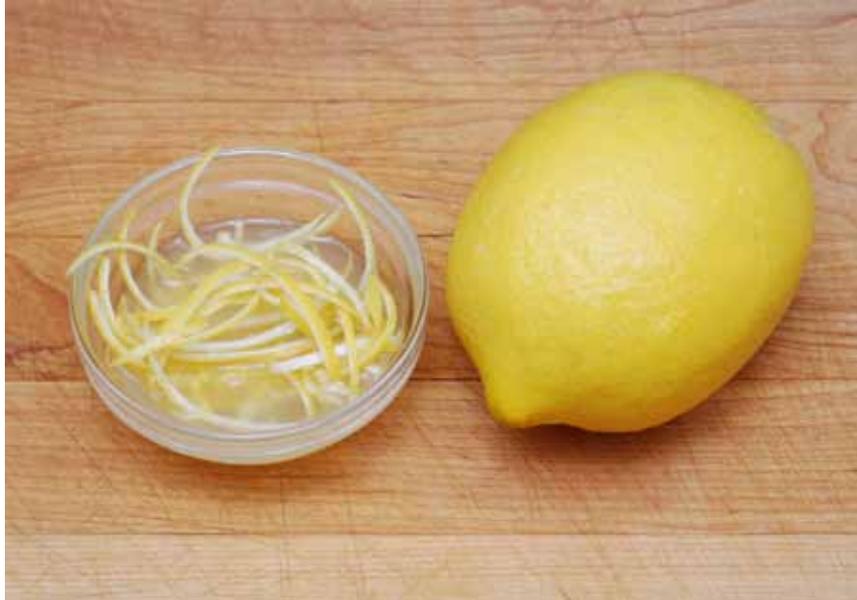
Add the $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of water and the cup of stock to the pan. In my case, the stock is frozen and needs to melt (that light colored disk in the pan above). Add the saffron (or turmeric), ginger, cinnamon, pepper, and coriander (cilantro) sprigs. Stir well to deglaze the bottom of the pan.

7



Add the browned lamb. Bring this mixture to a boil and then reduce the heat to low. Cover and simmer for 1 hour, turning the meat over after 30 minutes.

8



While the stew is simmering, zest the lemon. If you have one of those citrus zesters that removes the skin in long strings, use it. I don't have one, so I used a vegetable peeler to remove long strips of zest, which I then cut into thin threads, or chiffonade. I also juiced one of the lemons.

9



You can also toast the sesame seeds. I place mine in a stainless steel skillet over medium-high heat and toss them every few seconds, watching them closely. They will toast quickly. Toasting the seeds will give them a nuttier flavor. As soon as the sesame seeds are a soft golden color, transfer them from the skillet to a heat-safe bowl (in this case stainless steel). Leaving them in the hot skillet will cause further browning and could scorch them.

10



After the stew has simmered for an hour, add half the lemon zest and all the juice from the lemon. Cover and cook for another 30 minutes.

11



Finally, stir in the prunes and honey. Cover and simmer for an additional 30 minutes, until the lamb is very tender.

12



After 2 hours this tagine is ready to serve. Remove the cilantro sprigs, if you can find them. Mine dissolved into the stew, but I did find the string. Adjust for salt at this point. The flavor should have a slightly sweet/tart/citrus flavor from the honey, lemons, and prunes. It will also have a savory flavor from the stock and meat. Plate, garnish with toasted sesame seeds, and serve.

Conclusion

The first time I made this recipe I got it right when adjusting the original recipe. Using stock in place of water and adding the juice of the lemon (which was not called for in the original recipe) made an appreciable difference in the flavor. In future, I would not change this recipe by one molecule. I hit it just right with the formula. The flavor is rich and complex—not too spicy—sweet and savory.

Notes

¹ A *tagine* can also refer to the earthenware cooking vessel that consists of a round, circular, shallow base and a domed or conical lid. Some modern tagines have a cast iron base, which allow them to be heated on a stove (cooker) top to a higher temperature. I do not own one, mostly because it would be difficult to find a place to store something this large in my mobile home.



² Any stewing cut of lamb will suffice. The original recipe calls for lamb shanks, which are the front legs of the animal. The meat is often very tough and benefits from long, slow cooking. One time I substituted with pieces of lamb leg because it is relatively inexpensive and easily available at the local warehouse store.

³ Whenever possible, I try to substitute stock for water in savory recipes. I often cook rice in stock rather than water. Stock adds complexity, depth, and richness to a soup or stew. Water adds nothing but moisture. You can make your own stock from meat or fowl trim and bones. There is a recipe on this site. Look in the Recipe Archive, in Basics. Homemade meat stock has a velvety texture from the natural gelatin that comes from the bones and cartilage.