

Real Old-Fashioned Blanquette de Veau

by Jamie Schler

With the confidence and efficiency of a woman who has been cooking for friends and family for the better part of her 50-some years and knows just what she is about, Marie-Noëlle pulled me into her kitchen. She presented me with a package of crisp butcher's paper opened to reveal fragrant, glistening pink meat marbled with pristine white. "We'll be using *épaule*, the traditional blanquette cut, but also a few slices of *tendron*," she explained, as she pointed out the thinner breast meat, with the bone still nestled in the flesh, among the more familiar chunky pieces of shoulder. "The bones will infuse the sauce with a richer flavor as it simmers." Tall and slender, energetic and cheerful, my hostess was that intriguing blend of earthy and elegant I have always found so French, her movements fluid and graceful yet radiating unruffled self-confidence. Standing in her tidy blue-and-white kitchen in Tours, I watched Marie-Noëlle make *blanquette de veau à l'ancienne*, old-fashioned iconic veal blanquette, while I snapped photos and took notes.

I had met her just two months earlier, when our husbands renewed a 35-year-old friendship. The four of us found ourselves discussing French cooking, and Marie-Noëlle began to discourse enthusiastically on her

mother's and grandmother's *blanquette de veau*, which she has been making for three decades. Like all traditional home dishes, recipes for blanquette vary from family to family, and each cook is sure that her (or his) own is the best. I've loved blanquette ever since I moved to France and married into a French family more than 20 years ago, and I've long been on a quest to discover the best, purest version. I asked Marie-Noëlle, Would she show me how she prepared hers? "I'd be delighted," she said.

That day in her kitchen, continuing her exacting instruction, Marie-Noëlle pointed out the need to use meat that has rested for at least a week; she prefers that from her local butcher. "Veal bought at the supermarket is too fresh, sold too soon after slaughter," she said, pulling out carrots and an onion. "And fresh veal means tougher veal on the plate. Meat that has rested gives more tender results after slow cooking, and butchers always allow meat the proper resting time." I scribbled down each word, afraid that I would miss something, trying to capture each nuance of her decisive, exuberant directions. A stew yet not quite a stew, blanquette is a long-simmered *ragoût* of white meat, originally and most often veal. (Over time, chicken, lamb, and even fish were added to the repertoire.) The meat is cooked in a light stock or water, seasoned with a bouquet garni and traditionally just a carrot or two and an onion, then finished with a thickening roux to which cream and egg yolk are added for richness. This classic of *cuisine bourgeoise* is simple family cooking at its best — rich, filling, comforting, homey yet often elegant. Blanquette

was never a poor man's dish, since it could only be made in the kitchens of those who could afford cream, eggs, and fresh meat, but it is economical in its choice of cuts, using pieces such as the shoulder rather than the pricier roast. The whiteness of the sauce — *blanquette* comes from *blanc*, "white" — is achieved once the herbs and vegetables have been discarded and the cream added. The immaculate pale color and smoothness are signs of luxury and refinement.

An early recipe for a recognizable *blanquette* appeared in the important and influential *Le Cuisinier moderne* (first published in 1733 in two volumes in English as *The Modern Cook*, later expanded and published in five volumes in French) by Vincent La Chapelle, chef to Madame de Pompadour among others. He sought to introduce the newly emerging middle class to a more delicate cuisine. His *blanquette* is prepared with pre-roasted veal loin, cooled, trimmed of any charred bits, then sautéed and finally simmered in water, making a broth that is the base for the aromatic, thickened sauce, which doesn't sound nearly as delicious as Marie-Noëlle's dish. A 1752 supplement to the *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin* defines *blanquette* as a common dish in bourgeois homes, eaten *en famille*, a way to use up cooked leftover veal or lamb, which is lightly sautéed in butter without allowing it to color, before egg yolks and vinegar go in to create a sauce, "but being made of leftovers," it is a dish "that can't be honestly served to guests." Alexandre Dumas, novelist, *fin gourmet*, and expert cook, provides five recipes for *blanquette* in his *Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine*, employing different white meats and fish. He calls for the veal to be first roasted on a spit, which was then common practice with meats used in stews; the sauce is "bound with meticulous care, using as many egg yolks as needed, a little verjuice or lemon juice, a morsel of butter, a little parsley, and chopped pearl onions." Dumas does say that the roast veal used to prepare the *blanquette* could be leftover from another meal. The chef Jules Gouffé in his 1867 *Le Livre de cuisine*, innovative in its detail, precision, and explanations, is credited with changing the course of *blanquette* by calling for raw veal rather than precooked, although he offers both versions.

It wasn't until early in the 20th century that *blanquette* became a dish made for its own sake and carried proudly to the table for family and guests alike. By this time, it was de rigueur to purchase raw veal (breast, col-

lar, shoulder, or a combination) especially for the dish, and it was imperative that the sauce be white. To achieve that, the raw veal was covered in cold water, preserving its paleness, and simmered with carrots, onions, and herbs, these aromatic components being later discarded. The thickened sauce was strained as it was poured over the meat on its platter. Occasionally, the dish was embellished with mushrooms and pearl onions. By the 1930s, *blanquette de veau* appeared regularly in cookbooks, whether aimed at housewives or professional cooks. Henri-Paul Pellaprat, chef and instructor at Le Cordon Bleu, included it in *La Cuisine familiale et pratique*. Marie-Claude Finebouche provided a rich, mushroom-laden version in *La Cuisine de Madame*, which was filled with traditional French recipes gathered and written by and for home cooks. The acclaimed Auguste Escoffier wrote *Ma Cuisine* for restaurateurs, *maitres d'hôtel*, chefs de cuisine, and *la petite ménagère*, the "little housewife," putting his classic recipes, including *blanquette*, within reach of the home cook. By this time the cuts of meat and the procedure were settled, although variations were almost as numerous as cookbooks, each author having his or her own preferences as to the choice of herbs and spices, whether or not to thicken the sauce with a roux, and whether to finish the dish with the tang of a glass of wine, a splash of lemon, or a drizzle of vinegar.

By the time Emile Zola wrote *L'Assommoir* in 1877, *blanquette de veau* was so well established as a symbol of elegant upper-middle-class cooking that he had his working-class heroine, Gervaise, purposely prepare a "distinguished" mushroom-studded veal *blanquette* to impress her worldly friends. Examples in 20th-century literature show it was an institution in the kitchen of every good housewife. The prolific Georges Simenon, for instance, created the immortal police inspector Jules Maigret and his wife, Madame Maigret, a shining example of the stereotypical French *ménagère*. Her mornings were filled with visits to the neighborhood butcher, baker, fruit seller, fishmonger, and every day at noon her husband walked through the door to find his meal waiting. His preferred dish was *blanquette*.

My own introduction to French home cooking, and long my only point of reference, took place over 25 years ago in the kitchen of my mother-in-law, Madeleine. Frugality was the key to her homemaking, in the best French *ménagère* fashion. Hearty pot au feu, *poule au pot*, *daube de boeuf*, and more would be set to simmer

early in the morning so as to be ready for the family lunch, which appeared on the table every day at noon sharp. The kitchen was filled with succulent odors from a stew or from a roast pulled from the oven and served with hand-cut, homemade *frites*. I immediately fell in love with Madeleine's blanquette — tender chunks of veal cooked slowly in seasoned water with bright orange carrots and canned mushrooms, then enrobed in a creamy sauce. She used no actual cream for thickening but relied solely on a roux, and her blanquette was served over white rice. Her husband over his own serving drizzled *un filet de vinaigre*, a “thread” of red-wine vinegar, to heighten the flavor of the rather plain sauce. When I began to cook blanquette myself, I turned to cookbooks, searching for improvements on Madeleine's simple version. I studied the recipe of Madame Maigret, the one in *Les Meilleures Recettes de Françoise Bernard*, a fixture in every French kitchen, and the one in my faithful *Larousse gastronomique*. I replaced Madeleine's canned mushrooms with fresh, cooked briefly with pearl onions, then added the juice of about half a lemon for acidity and flavor, and whisked into the sauce lots of thick *crème fraîche* and egg yolk. But through the years, the more I sought recipes and experimented, the more my questions mounted. Should the veal first be browned lightly in butter or should it be placed raw in the cooking liquid? Should I add wine, lemon juice, or even vinegar (a common and less expensive flavoring)? Should onion go into the broth and then be discarded or should pearl onions be tossed in at the end, or both? Cloves or no cloves? Mushrooms or no mushrooms? Cream or milk? Roux or none? Should the vegetables be left in or discarded? Did a single truly authentic *blanquette à l'ancienne* even exist? I tried each possibility, taking notes, recording preferences, debating this or that ingredient with my equally passionate husband.

My search culminated that day in Tours, where I found myself following Marie-Noëlle out to her vegetable garden. She snipped off branches of thyme, *sarriette* (savory), and rosemary for her bouquet garni. She filled my hands with huge, bright-green bay leaves, quickly drying all the extra in her microwave and to store for the winter ahead. Returning to her blanquette, Marie-Noëlle tenderly arranged the cuts of veal in the bottom of a beautiful, wide copper stewpot, seasoning the meat with salt, generously grinding in pepper, tossing in loose fresh herbs, and pouring in a large glass of wine. “How much?” I would ask with my pencil poised.

But her tactic was *cuisiner au pif*, literally “cook by the nose” — by instinct. And as I had years before with my mother-in-law, I found myself trying to capture precise quantities from a cook who rarely measures anything, who knows from experience how much to add and when, adapting to the ingredients at hand, adjusting to taste. Seeing my predicament, Marie-Noëlle graciously rifled through cupboards for a measuring glass and her rarely used scale, and then she paused along the way to calculate and weigh. I grabbed at her words and jotted them down.

For a truly traditional blanquette, Marie-Noëlle was adamant. The veal must absolutely be the best you can afford, with at least part of it on the bone to add richness and flavor. No cloves are permitted to overpower the delicate sauce. A large glassful of good white wine heightens the flavor of the broth and adds its gentle zing of acidity. The vegetables must be discarded after cooking. The pot used to cook the roux must be sparkling clean to guarantee a perfectly white blanquette. She herself adds no mushrooms, no tiny onions to the finished dish, thus preserving the smoothness and purity of the sauce.

Marie-Noëlle and I called our families to lunch, and only then did she whisk an egg yolk into the thickest *crème fraîche* I had ever seen, cool and creamy with the merest hint of tang. She quickly whisked that into the sauce, heating it ever so gently to prevent it from coming to a boil. I always serve my blanquette with plain white rice, but Marie-Noëlle carried hers to the table accompanied by her mother's *riz gras*, “fat rice,” long white grains cooked risotto-style in a bit of oil and then broth from the blanquette, and finally studded with lightly caramelized, meltingly soft bits of onion and tiny, salty cubes of lardons. We opened a second bottle of crisp, chilled white Touraine Azay-le-Rideau and dug in.

Blanquette de veau à l'ancienne

The white wine in the sauce isn't usual, but it is part of Marie-Noëlle's family recipe, which is truly the best I have ever eaten (though I do add a garnish of mushrooms and tiny onions), and the tang of the wine is less pronounced than that of the lemon I used to use. It gives more nuance of flavor and even a subtle sweetness, depending on the wine. The blanquette is normally served with rice, although it could be served with egg noodles. (If you reheat leftovers the following day, do so very gently and slowly over low heat — do not allow the sauce to boil.) The

wine might be a Loire Chenin Blanc, such as Azay-le-Rideau, a white Côte-du-Rhône, such as a Sablet, or a northern Rhone wine, such as a white Crozes-Hermitage.

for the veal and bouillon

1.6 kg (3.5 pounds) shoulder and breast of veal,
about a quarter of the weight being bone
1 onion, peeled and sliced lengthwise in two
2 small carrots or 1 large one, peeled and sliced in
thick coins
a bouquet garni of 2 branches of fresh rosemary,
2 or 3 branches of thyme, and, if you have
it, savory, plus 1 bay leaf, either loose or tied
together (if you don't have fresh herbs, use
about ¼ teaspoon dried rosemary and ½
teaspoon dried thyme, tied in a muslin bag to
avoid dark specks in the sauce)
salt and black pepper
250 ml (1 cup) dry white wine
water

Place the meats in a large stockpot or stewpot. Add the onion, carrots, and bouquet garni, a couple of large pinches of salt, and a grinding of black pepper. Pour in the white wine and then enough water to cover well. Bring to a boil over high heat, immediately reduce the heat to low, and simmer gently until the meat is very tender — at least 1 hour and 20 minutes.

Remove the pot from the heat and transfer the meat from the broth to a bowl. Cover it, so it doesn't dry or discolor in the air. Remove the vegetables and herbs and discard them. Pass the broth through a fine strainer.

Quickly clean the pot — the blanquette must be white, so you want no cooking dregs — or switch to another clean, more decorative pot, such as of copper, in which to finish the cooking and serve the blanquette.

for the roux

the strained bouillon
50 gr (3½ tablespoons) butter
50 gr (6½ tablespoons) flour

Measure the bouillon; you should have about 1.2 liters (5 cups). If by any chance you have too little (you may have cooked the meat over too high heat), add enough water

to make up the difference; if by any chance you have too much (from cooking the meat very gently), then boil the bouillon to reduce the quantity.

Melt the butter in the clean pot over medium-low heat. Add the flour to the butter all at once and whisk or stir to make a smooth, thick paste. Cook 2 to 3 minutes without allowing it to color. Add the strained bouillon a ladleful at a time, whisking constantly and waiting for the sauce to thicken slightly before adding more, keeping the sauce lump-free. Continue adding and whisking until you have added all the bouillon. You can complement the bouillon with a little water, if you want a thinner sauce, but it should remain thick enough to coat a spoon. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Simmer the sauce over very low heat for at least half an hour to eliminate the possibility of a raw-flour taste. At the end of that time, remove the skin that has formed on top.

Return the meat to the sauce in the pot. If you prepare the blanquette ahead of time, say an hour or so, leave it at this point.

to finish the sauce

300 gr (10½ oz) beautiful white button
mushrooms, cleaned and trimmed,
any large ones cut into quarters
1 cup (125 gr) pearl onions, cleaned, trimmed,
and sliced in half if larger than a dime
15 gr (1 tablespoon) butter
1 lemon, for juice
1 large egg yolk
200 ml (scant ¾ cup) very good-quality, thick crème
fraîche or, if that is not available, heavy cream

Heat the meat gently in the sauce.

Put the mushrooms and pearl onions into a pot with just enough water to cover the bottom; add the butter and a squeeze of lemon juice. Cover, bring to a boil, and remove from the heat. Allow to sit for a few minutes with the cover on; drain the liquid into the sauce.

When the meat in the sauce is hot — and only just before serving — whisk the egg yolk into the crème fraîche, then whisk that mixture into the sauce in the stockpot, heating very slowly over a low flame, taking care that the sauce never boils. It will thicken slightly. Stir in the mushrooms and pearl onions. Taste, adding a further squeeze of lemon if you desire, but not enough that the sauce tastes of lemon. Accompany with rice. *Serves 6.* 🌸