

Food & drink

How to... cook in a *potjie* on safari

Patrick Bond Gunning and Amanda Castleman, co-owners of Black Pot Safaris, traded their careers in the kitchens of “cool Britannia” for an adventurous life in the southern African bush. They specialise in tailor-made camping trips with top notch bush cuisine. Here they bring out their trusty black pots and give us the low-down on their own distinctive brand of *potjie* cooking.



When the Dutch landed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 they brought their cast-iron cooking pots with them. In order to cook over open fires in the bush, they adapted these pots by adding three legs and a slightly domed lid on which coals could be placed. Thus the Dutch oven or *potjie* - pronounced poy-key - was born. These *potjie* pots retained heat well and could be left simmering over a few embers. The *potjie* has become part of South Africa's cooking heritage.

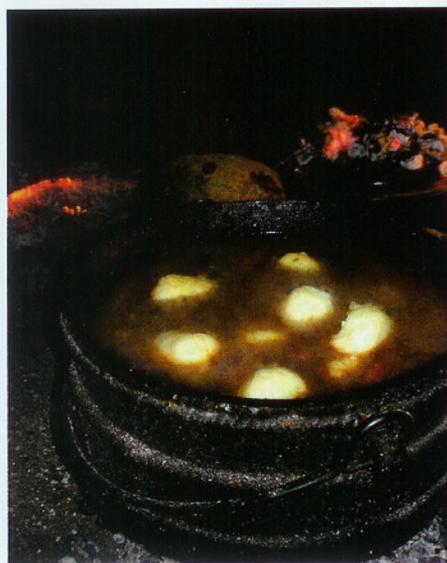
No two *potjie* recipes ever taste the same. The pores in the cast iron retain the flavours of past *potjie* adventures and blend seamlessly with each new culinary masterpiece. In South Africa, a traditional *potjie* dish is built in layers with the meat and hard vegetables at the bottom and the softer vegetables at the top. Cooking in the *potjie* is expected to be a long, drawn-out, social affair sometimes taking up to four hours - depending on your choice of ingredients - before the perfect pot food is ready to be enjoyed.

The experts say that you must never stir a *potjie* while cooking! This is because the *potjie*'s round belly allows the heat to be evenly distributed around the pot ensuring even cooking while its heavy, domed lid prevents any moisture escaping. Unsurprisingly this cooking technique takes practice and a lot of self-control to master. Luckily there is an alternative!

Although the *potjie* is the perfect pot to accompany you on your travels, we personally found that cooking layered meals, however delicious, was impractical for us when we were on the road. Often we would get to our camp late having been distracted

by a herd of elephants or a nocturnal creature emerging for its nightly rounds or even a particularly beautiful sunset. Making camp would be our first priority. That done we would just want to cook something quick, easy and delicious while sitting around the fire enjoying the night sounds.

We're not claiming to have re-invented *potjie* cooking. Instead we've just adapted it to suit our needs and today we use it as a brilliant, quick-cooking wok with a lid! We still adhere to the fundamental principles of *potjie* cooking. We cook on an open fire using everyday ingredients to produce delicious and nutritious one-pot meals. We have studied and learnt the quirks of its moisture retaining, even heat distributing cooking method. We just stir our black pot as often as we need to. □



Italian beef casserole with polenta dumplings

This casserole is cooked in a medium-sized black *potjie* pot with a lid. Before you start, take some coals from your fire and shape into a flat bed. Remember to renew the coals regularly to keep an even temperature during cooking. Serves up to 12.

4 tablespoons olive oil
2 onions, sliced
4 garlic cloves, crushed
2 tablespoons plain flour
2 kg goulash steak, cut into 3cm cubes
3 cups (750ml) beef stock
2 tablespoons chopped fresh oregano
4 x 425g cans tomatoes
4 red peppers, roasted, peeled and cut into strips
200g instant polenta
180g ready-made pesto

Heat the oil, add the onion and garlic and cook until the onions are soft but not brown. Sprinkle the flour into the pot and stir well. Add the cubed beef, stock, oregano, tomatoes and red peppers. Season and simmer for 15 minutes. Place the lid on the pot. Take some coals from the fire and place some under the pot and some on the lid. Cook the casserole with the lid on for 90 minutes.

Meanwhile, boil 600ml of water in a separate pan, then bring down to a simmer. Pour in the polenta in a thin stream, season and cook, stirring for 2 minutes or until it thickens and comes away from the side of the saucepan. Remove from the heat and allow to cool, then shape into 24 round dumplings. Brush the coals and ash from the pot with a soft brush, open the lid and place the dumplings on top of the casserole. Take some more coals from the fire and re-cover the pot. Cook covered for an hour, then uncovered for 20-30 minutes. Garnish with the pesto and serve.