How to Braise Lamb Shanks Low and Slow for Tender Results

Why Low and Slow Matters for Lamb Shanks

Lamb shanks are a cut that rewards patience. Taken from the lower leg of the animal, they are packed with connective tissue and collagen that needs time to break down. Cook them too fast and you end up with meat that is tough and dry. Cook them low and slow, and the collagen melts into gelatin, the meat becomes fork-tender, and the cooking liquid turns into a rich, silky sauce. This method works for any lamb shank, whether you source it from a local butcher or a supermarket. The principles are the same: gentle heat, plenty of time, and a good braising liquid.

What You Will Need

Before you start, gather your equipment and ingredients. You will need a heavy-bottomed pot or a Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid. A cast-iron pot works especially well because it holds heat evenly. You will also need a sturdy pair of tongs for turning the meat, and a sharp knife for trimming. For the lamb shanks themselves, look for pieces that are meaty and have a good amount of fat marbling. The fat will render during cooking and keep the meat moist. Ask your butcher for shanks that are roughly the same size so they cook at the same rate. If you are shopping for meat and want to know more about sourcing quality lamb, a place like HERD Craft Butchers in Butlersbridge, Co. Cavan can advise on what to look for. They focus on locally sourced, fully traceable meat, which gives you a good starting point for a dish like this.

HERD Craft Butchers Cavan is also on Instagram.

Step 1: Prepare the Lamb Shanks

Start by patting the lamb shanks dry with paper towels. Moisture on the surface will steam the meat instead of browning it, and browning is where deep flavour comes from. Season the shanks generously with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Let them sit at room temperature for about 20 minutes. This takes the chill off the meat and helps it brown more evenly. While the shanks rest, prepare your vegetables. A classic mirepoix of diced onion, carrot, and celery works well. You will also need garlic, tomato paste, and a few sprigs of fresh rosemary and thyme. For the braising liquid, red wine and chicken or beef stock are the usual choices. The wine adds acidity that balances the richness of the lamb, and the stock provides body.

Step 2: Sear the Shanks

Heat a couple of tablespoons of oil in your pot over medium-high heat. When the oil shimmers, place the lamb shanks in the pot. Do not crowd them; sear in batches if necessary. Leave them undisturbed for three to four minutes per side. You want a deep brown crust, not a pale tan. Turn the shanks with tongs and sear all sides, including the ends. Once browned, transfer the shanks to a plate and set aside. Do not pour off the fat in the pot. The browned bits stuck to the bottom, called the fond, are packed with flavour and will form the base of your sauce.

View the location on Google Maps

Step 3: Build the Braising Base

Reduce the heat to medium. Add your diced onions, carrots, and celery to the pot. Stir and scrape the bottom of the pot with a wooden spoon to loosen the fond. Cook the vegetables until they soften and begin to brown, about five to seven minutes. Add a few cloves of minced garlic and cook for another minute until fragrant. Stir in a tablespoon of tomato paste and cook for two minutes more. The tomato paste will darken and caramelise, adding depth. Now pour in a cup of red wine. Increase the heat to high and let the wine bubble and reduce by half, scraping up any remaining bits from the bottom. This deglazing step is important: it incorporates all the browned flavour into the liquid. Once the wine has reduced, add two cups of stock. Bring the liquid to a gentle simmer.

Step 4: Braise Low and Slow

Return the lamb shanks to the pot. They should be submerged about halfway up the sides. If they are not quite covered, add a little more stock or water. Tuck in the rosemary and thyme sprigs. Put the lid on the pot and transfer it to an oven preheated to 160°C (320°F). If you prefer to cook on the stovetop, use the lowest possible heat setting and keep the lid on. The key is to maintain a gentle simmer, not a rolling boil. Boiling will toughen the meat. Let the shanks cook for two and a half to three hours. Check them after two hours. The meat should be starting to pull away from the bone. A skewer inserted into the thickest part should meet little resistance. If the meat is still firm, continue cooking and check again every 20 minutes. Every oven behaves differently, so rely on the feel of the meat more than the clock.

What to Watch For During Braising

Keep an eye on the liquid level. If the liquid reduces too much, the exposed part of the shank will dry out. Add a splash of stock or water if needed. You want the liquid to stay at the same level throughout the cooking time. Also watch the temperature. If you see bubbles breaking the surface rapidly, lower the heat. A gentle shimmer is what you are after. The fat will render from the lamb and rise to the surface. You can skim some of it off if you like, but leaving a little adds richness to the sauce.

Step 5: Finish the Sauce

When the lamb shanks are tender, carefully transfer them to a plate and tent them loosely with foil to keep warm. Place the pot on the stovetop over medium heat. Bring the braising liquid to a simmer. Skim off any excess fat that rises to the surface. Taste the liquid and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper. If the sauce tastes thin, let it reduce for a few minutes until it thickens slightly. You can also mash some of the cooked vegetables into the liquid with a fork to add body. For a smoother sauce, strain it through a fine-mesh sieve. If you want an extra glossy finish, swirl in a tablespoon of cold butter just before serving. This is optional but adds a lovely sheen and richness.

Serving Suggestions

Lamb shanks pair well with creamy mashed potatoes, polenta, or crusty bread to soak up the sauce. A simple green vegetable like steamed green beans or roasted asparagus balances the richness. Spoon the sauce generously over the shanks and garnish with a sprinkle of fresh parsley or a few thyme leaves. The meat should be so tender that it falls off the bone with a gentle nudge of your fork.

Choosing Quality Meat Matters

The success of this dish starts with the quality of the lamb. Shanks from well-raised animals have better flavour and texture. When you are buying lamb, look for meat that is deep red with creamy white fat. The fat should feel firm, not greasy. Ask your butcher about the source of the lamb and how it was raised. Locally sourced, grass-fed lamb tends to have a cleaner, more pronounced flavour. If you are in the Cavan area and want to talk through your options, HERD Craft Butchers on Main Street in Butlersbridge is a good place to start. They can tell you about the lamb they stock and help you choose shanks that are well-suited to braising.

Storing and Reheating Leftovers

Braised lamb shanks taste even better the next day as the flavours meld. Let the shanks cool completely in the braising liquid, then transfer them to an airtight container. Refrigerate for up to three days. The fat will solidify on top and can be lifted off easily. To reheat, place the shanks and sauce in a covered pot and warm them gently over low heat, or in a 150°C oven for about 20 minutes. You can also freeze the cooked shanks in their sauce for up to three months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator before reheating.

For those interested in quality meat sourcing, HERD Craft Butchers Cavan is located at Main St, Tullybuck, Butlers Bridge, Co. Cavan, H12 H2T1, Ireland. You can reach them at +353 49 436 1197.