Sourdough Stew resembles a classic, simple meal: a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. Except in this case the bread seemed to have thought it was a bone, and snuck into the stock pot. When you try this rich, slightly tart chunky stew, you will be glad it did.

To make sourdough bone broth, bone and bread are treated equally, browning under the same broiler before being locked together in a vat of boiling water. The sourdough flavor impregnates the broth and everything in it, while filling the air with the faint yeasty aroma of a microbrewery.

The bread proves almost as durable as the bone, slowly breaking down but never leaving. Pieces of bread remain in the broth, soft clouds floating around your bowl like the egg drops in a bowl of egg drop soup. We could blend it all into a puree, but then we’d lose the delicate features of this comforting bowl of bone and bread broth.

I never intended to find a way to combine bread and soup into one easy-to-slurp meal. I was trying to recreate Beef Stew Sandwich, my favorite dish at the best Vietnamese restaurant in Albuquerque.

At the time, I was the restaurant critic for Albuquerque’s Weekly Alibi, so I had a say in such matters, and had proclaimed Viet Taste the city’s best of its category. The Beef Stew Sandwich consisted of a toasted section of baguette on a plate, next to a modest bowl of chunky soup. The toast was chewy enough that you could use it to grab chunks of stew, packed with carrots, potato and beef. The aromatic stew tasted pho-like but was disorientingly thick with melted cartilage. I first assumed that this sludge was simply what was left at the bottom of the pho pot, with added vegetables, and I was totally on board for that. I now know that this was a stew called bo kho, flavored similarly to pho. But in my early attempts to recreate that Beef Stew Sandwich, I came up with sourdough soup.

I was trying to reduce the liquid in a pot of meat and bones down to a thick paste, but it would not thicken enough. Getting impatient, I ripped up the bread I was going to serve with the stew, and threw the pieces into the pot.

My breaded broth didn’t thicken into a luxurious brown sauce like in the Beef Stew Sandwich, but something curious happened. The bread happened to be sourdough. As the meat cooked in the sourdough broth, a promising aroma emerged, like a pot of coq au vin after you add a second bottle of wine.

For the tart sourdough flavor to assert itself, the bread you use must be a top shelf loaf or baguette, not some off-the-rack clone from the back of the supermarket baked by some out of state company. Find who is baking the best sourdough close to home, and use their bread. My favorite is a local multigrain sourdough, which imparts a porridge-like quality to the soup.

Use red meat bones, like beef or lamb, preferably with chunks of meat and gristle attached. Deer bones work great, too. Depending on your tastes, you’ll probably want to skim the fat. I find butter to be the most appropriate and “comfy” fat in a bowl of bread soup.

Sourdough Bone Stew

Use whatever cooking setup you would to make bone broth. I use an electric pressure cooker, aka the Instant Pot, but you can make this in a slow cooker or on the stovetop. Your active time is about the same either way, but the slower methods take longer and burn more energy, while the Instant Pot is like going into hyperspace. Time speeds up inside the pressure chamber, allowing the food to travel great distances in short periods of time.

Four large servings

1 piece marrow bone, preferably an end piece with bits of meat and gristle  
1 pound meat, the more gristle and connective tissue the better, cut into 1 inch cubes  
1 loaf of the best sourdough you can find, white or brown sliced  
2 tablespoons cider vinegar  
1 onion, cut in half  
2 large carrots, cut in half  
4 stalks celery, cut in half  
1 large potato, cut into 1-inch cubes  
1 sprig fresh thyme or 1 teaspoon dried  
1 cup wine (white wine with white sourdough, red with dark sourdough)  
For serving: butter to taste to adjust fat, if necessary

Brown the meat and bones under the broiler, turning often, before anything burns, until everything is brown. For the last few minutes of browning, add the bread, in whole slices or chunks. Turn the slices quickly, before they burn.

When meat, bones and bread have been browned all around, transfer the meat and bones to your cooking vessel, in enough water to cover everything by two inches. Crumble the toasted bread into the water, as finely as possible. Add the cider vinegar and cook for an hour in the pressure cooker, or about 4 hours on the stove, covered on medium heat, or about 8 hours in the slow cooker. Add the carrot, celery, onion, potato, thyme and wine. Cook for another half-hour under pressure (2 and 4 hours, respectively, for the other methods). Remove carrot, celery and onion. Save the carrots for later.

Depending on how fatty the bones are, at this point you might want to allow the soup to cool for a spell, perhaps overnight, so you can skim the fat. You could do this after the first or second cooking.

Finally slowly cook it down until the broth is mostly gone, stirring often and occasionally scraping off the starchy accumulation that tends to build up on the bottom. When it’s more chunky than brothy, it’s basically ready.  About 20 minutes before serving, remove the bone, slice the soft carrots and return them to the soup. Season with whatever else strikes your fancy. Sometimes I even add soy sauce and pho seasoning cube, for old times’ sake. If the soup tastes too lean, I add butter.