

Menu  
Cheddar Crackers  
Pinot Braised Short Ribs  
Whipped Butternut Squash  
Chocolate-Dipped Mandarin Oranges

The Game Plan

The day before, or early in the day:

*(About 1½ hours hands on, plus braising and cooling time for the ribs, about 5 hours total, plus optional but recommended extra time for cooling and reheating the ribs – see the recipe instructions for details.)*

- Make the Pinot Braised Short Ribs.
- There are steps in the preparation of the short ribs that are hands off, while the pancetta sautés, and while the wine reduces. Use the time while those things are happening to peel, cook, season and mash the Whipped Butternut Squash. Let the squash cool, then transfer it to a baking dish, cover the dish, and chill the squash until later.
- Mix the dough for the Cheddar Crackers. Wrap the dough and chill it until later.
- When the ribs finish cooking, let them cool slightly, then (optional) chill the ribs and sauce separately for several hours (4 is ideal), or overnight.
- Clean up the kitchen, load and run the dishwasher.

2½ hours before dinner:

*(About 30 minutes)*

- Heat the oven for the Cheddar Crackers, and while it heats, roll out and cut the crackers. Bake the crackers.
- While the crackers bake, make the Chocolate-Dipped Mandarin Oranges. Set them aside at room temperature to set.

2 hours before dinner, enjoy the Cheddar Crackers with a glass of wine.

45 minutes before dinner:

*(45 minutes)*

- Heat the oven for the butternut squash.
- Empty the dishwasher and load it with the appetizer dishes.
- Separate the fat from the sauce for the short ribs, and reheat the ribs in the sauce on the stove. If you've just braised the short ribs and skipped the cooling step, then defat the sauce, and finish the sauce in the last few minutes before dinner (last step, below).
- Bake the squash.
- Open the dinner wine.
- Set the table.
- Start the dinner music.
- Light the candles.
- Finish the sauce for the short ribs.

After dinner:

*(10 minutes)*

- Clear the table. While your partner loads the dishwasher, arrange the Chocolate-Dipped Mandarin Oranges on a plate for serving.

Notes:

- *The short ribs and the dough for the crackers need to be done ahead, and the whipped butternut squash is convenient to do ahead, but there is flexibility in how far ahead to do these steps. The day before, early in the day, or just enough ahead to get them done for your serving deadline, it's up to you. Consult the recipes for specifics; the timing I've suggested here is one schedule that will work well.*
- *We like to enjoy an appetizer about 2 hours before dinner. If you prefer to have the appetizer closer to dinner, adjust the timeline accordingly.*
- *The hands-on work time estimates (in parentheses below the start times) are for one person doing it all, but some of these tasks can be shared or delegated.*