
JOURNAL OF THE BALINT SOCIETY, VOLUME 50, 2025

A Spoonful of Balint (A Recipe)

Balint Society Essay Prize 2024 Winner

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Prep Time: 20 minutes

Cooking Time: 60 minutes

Serves: 4-10

I love making Balint. I tend to make it once a week, on a Wednesday afternoon, just as I'm starting to become weary of the working week, and the weekend still seems so far away. I have often pondered it as so unusual to make something like this at work. Hospitals don't tend to evoke that 'warm, fuzzy' feeling, so it's a welcome change to put on my chef's hat and forget how to 'fix' or 'do' and instead sit and listen to the clock tick. I am delighted to be able to share this recipe with you today and hope that more of us will see Balint made more widely, by chefs still yet to be discovered.

I suppose that anyone reading this is at the very least curious about Balint (in reality, dear reader, you're likely to be a seasoned professional Balinter with more years making it than me). Sometimes, though, a fresh approach can work, so I hope reading this recipe will stimulate a change in how you Balint or prompt you to write in with your top tips.

I often find pure Balint to be tricky but, like with any dish, the more I have made Balint the easier it has become. Now, two years into the Balint way, I feel honoured to make it quite well, hopefully, although I'm not holding out for a Michelin Star just yet.

I make Balint for a general group at the moment, a crop of young doctors fresh out of medical school, spread across our region with sparse autonomy and many electronic notes to write. Balint for them can be a bitter tonic. My handy hack in this recipe is to dilute it just enough that it's palatable yet still retains that distinctive flavour that leaves them wanting more.

This is a fine balance, and I confess I don't always get it right. Sometimes they curl their nose at the idea that there is 'no right answer' or scoff at an off-the-wall interpretation I offer. Recently, I made Balint with someone who walked out the room! I couldn't tell if it reeked, reminded him too much of a dearly departed loved one, or perhaps he needed the toilet. More likely is that I'll never know as he's not yet returned (it's been over a month).

Conversely, I have also recently had Participants take to it like the proverbial duck, gliding through their four months in our pond, writing at the end that it was the highlight of their week. I suppose this reflects that the success of Balint does depend on the Participants with whom you make it. Those less mature or experienced might curdle the batch, spoiling the taste for others, but they may also have the pep and zing needed for a truly excellent Balint. Diluting the Balint cordial can be a kindness, making something quite abstract and intimidating softer and more appealing to the biomedical empiricists that our universities train up.

The more I make, the more I realise I don't really know what will happen each week. It's an acquired taste, but that's part of the fun.

You'll be wondering why I use 'I' so much here when we all know that making Balint takes two. I am happy to say my co-chef is the best I could wish for. We have worked together for a year and no longer need to communicate about such frippery like timekeeping. We dance around our Balint kitchen with implicit trust and ease, satisfied that if one of us invites the presenter back into the circle, now is the right time for it. I do think however that we have a different Balint genealogy (stretching back generations) that means we make it differently. We use slightly different tools and flavouring conventions, and I recall it required some adjustments when we started a year ago so as not to step on each other's toes or trip over ourselves. He approaches Balint as though the patient is there making it with you – what a revolutionary idea this was when I heard it?! A patient... making Balint?! Whatever next. But this approach has started to wend its way into my

Balinting, much like how I may pull the presenter back in with, 'feel free to re-join the conversation when you're ready'.

I wouldn't put words in his mouth, but maybe he'll share his recipe with you in due course, as different as it may be to mine.

While they do say that curiosity killed the cat, I can't write about making Balint without commenting on it and am sorry to endanger all our lives like this. At the core of every Balint I make is a kernel of curiosity, and without it the Balint simply won't rise. I think of it like the symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast (a reference for all the Kombucha brewers reading this), the liquid gold that allows the primary and secondary fermentations to occur with some intangible quality that adds sourness and acidity but also sweetness and depth. Some Participants simply don't have curiosity, and I wonder if they were once the cat, wounded by caring too deeply for someone or something else. I cannot ever know this answer, but I feel grateful to have had my own curiosity nurtured by Balinters before me and now with the chance to pay it forward. I mourn the loss of this curiosity in others and hope for its spark to reignite over their career.

Can you write about Balint without a brief word on silence? Everyone who makes Balint has a different tolerance for silence, and there is no universally agreed right amount. I like to think about it as a proportion; am I adding enough silence for the other flavours to shine? Is there enough silence for the Group to breathe? Is there too much silence now, suffocating the Group? I have seen Balints thrive with the right amount but know it must be titrated exactly. Managing this titration is hard while concentrating on the faces around the circle and flurries of conversation, and I recall finding a recent silence intolerable. I simply had to burst the bubble, effervescent in my chair with something to say, frustrated that no one else would. But I did restrain myself and beheld a Participant pipe up two heartbeats later, offering up a thought that must have flitted through my mind directly into hers. The silence works: have faith.

Without further ado, here is my tried and tested Balint Recipe:

Ingredients

- 1 (but preferably 2) Balint Leaders
- 4-10 Participants – the more you use, the more you might need to stir the pot
- 1 'Does anybody have a case?'
- 1 doctor-patient relationship
- 1 ladleful of curiosity
- Several healthy sprinklings of silence
- 1 jar of Questions of Fact

Steps

1. Create a safe and welcoming space for the Balint to rise. Set the scene with some confidentiality, introductions, and warmth. Make sure the Group is in a circle and can all see each other.
2. Time to add the 'Does anybody have a case?'
3. Allow the silence to settle until someone is so uncomfortable they crack like an egg, spilling a viscous story that could hold anything from raving madness and sombre death to raucous joy or mind-boggling boredom.
4. At the end of the story, make a judgement as to whether Questions of Fact will add or take away from the Balint experience. There is no right or wrong here – some suggest a maximum of 3 questions, while others might give 10 minutes.
5. Push back the Presenter and allow that safe space you created earlier to heat up.
6. Allow another liberal sprinkling of silence.

7. You should start to see some bubbles at the point, hopefully from a range of points around the room. Try to resist stirring as much as possible.
8. Despite your resistance, a stir may be needed. Be judicious, don't use too much force, and try to follow the flow of the conversation.
9. Season with curiosity as needed, and make sure you taste as you go, looking for the bouquet of the doctor, the patient, and (most importantly) the relationship.
10. At the right moment, bring the Presenter back in. Fold them back into the Group, infusing with flavour and reflection, but take care not to over mix.
11. Take off the boil 60 minutes after starting, certainly no more. Thank the Group and bottle up that warm Balinty goodness until your next batch.

Some Cautions!

- A. Sometimes you might have a very lively Balint, with Participants fighting over which case to bring, or certain people demanding more attention during discussion. Trust your gut instinct in these cases: if someone is obnoxiously hogging the room, it's likely others will have noticed and be resentful. Nurturing the Group can sometimes require you to dispense some tough love.
- B. You may worry about your Balint being too large or too small. It can lose its wow factor with too many Participants and might also be too uncertain and volatile to handle. Conversely, fewer people mean you'll struggle to get it to rise whatsoever, having to stir and steer the Balint far more than you'd want and losing the authenticity of the Participants' contributions. These issues are sometimes inevitable, and you must persevere through to the next week,

perhaps with a kind but firmly worded reminder that attendance is expected.

Summary

My Balinting journey has been a great privilege, and I feel fortunate to know I have many years left to do it, and many more Balints to try (I recently found out how good Oxford Balint tastes – I highly recommend).

Even after writing up this recipe, I still don't quite know what Balint is. Is it a juice or cordial, readily diluted to one's palate? Is it a carefully crafted pie, decorated and baked in a roasting oven? Is it a collaborative fermentation, a hearty stew, a bread that you watch rise? Is it all these things and more?

I think it must be, because Balint's unknowability is its attraction, and I'm glad that I still find myself compelled so many years in. I shall continue to peak and trough for as long as I make Balint – it's never the same twice, and therein lies the beauty.

Good luck!