Corned Beef (adapted from Alton Brown)

6 to 8 servings

The use of saltpeter (potassium nitrate) is up to you. Its purpose is to make the meat pink; without it, it turns the purpley gray that you see in my pictures. Cooks Illustrated's corned beef write-up reported chemical flavors whenever they used saltpeter, and I couldn't find it anyway, so I left it out, and truthfully, I quite like the color of the meat at the end of cooking.

4 cups water
½ cup kosher salt
6 tablespoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon saltpeter (optional)
½ cinnamon stick, broken into several pieces
1 teaspoon mustard seeds
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
4 whole cloves
4 whole allspice berries
6 whole juniper berries
2 bay leaves, crumbled
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
4 quarts ice
1 (4 to 5 pound) beef brisket, trimmed

Place the water in a 5-quart pot along with the salt, sugar, saltpeter (if using), and spices. Cook over high heat until the salt and sugar have dissolved. Add the ice and let set the mixture until the ice is mostly melted. Once the liquid is cold, place the brisket in a 1-gallon zip-top bag and add the brine. Seal and lay flat inside a 9x13-inch pan. Refrigerate for 5 days, turning occasionally. After 5 days, remove the meat from the brine and rinse it under cool water. Cook using your favorite recipe. (I like to keep it very simple, just simmering the brisket in water for a few hours until it's tender, adding potatoes, carrots and cabbage right at the end.)