

Best French Onion Soup

Most versions of this age-old recipe hide a mediocre broth under a crust of bread and a blanket of Gruyère. What is the secret to coaxing impressive flavor out of humble onions?

BY REBECCA HAYS

Legend has it that a hungry King Louis XV of France invented onion soup after returning home to an empty larder late one night from a hunting excursion. He took the few ingredients he could find—a sack of onions, leftover beef stock, and a bottle of Champagne—and created the now-famous recipe.

These days, the ideal French onion soup combines a satisfying broth redolent of sweet caramelized onions with a slice of toasted baguette and melted cheese. But the reality is that most of the onion soup you find isn't very good. Once you manage to dig through the layer of congealed cheese to unearth a spoonful of broth, it just doesn't taste like onions. I discovered the source of these watery, weak broths when I looked up some recipes. One was particularly appalling, calling for a mere 7 ounces of onions to make soup for six! Even more disturbing were those recipes that advised sautéing the onions for only five or six minutes—not nearly enough time for them to caramelize.

The French Connection

The good news is that I really didn't need these lackluster recipes. I knew of a terrific one introduced to the test kitchen by a friend visiting from France. Henri Pinon patiently cooked 3 pounds of onions in butter over very low heat until they were golden brown (this took about 90 minutes), then deglazed the pot with water. Nothing unusual there—deglazing is common in onion soup recipes. What followed, however, was something entirely new. Henri allowed the onions to recaramelize, and then he deglazed the pan again. And again. He repeated this process several more times over the course of another hour, finally finishing the soup by simmering the onions with water, white wine, and a sprig of thyme. He garnished the soup in the traditional way, with a slice of crusty toasted baguette and a very modest amount of shredded Gruyère, passing the crocks under the broiler to melt the cheese. How did it taste? Beyond compare—the broth was impossibly rich, with deep onion flavor that burst through the tanginess of the Gruyère and bread.

Having watched Henri make his soup, I couldn't wait to give the recipe a try. But before I started cooking, I pondered his technique. When onions caramelize, a complex series of chemical reactions takes place. Heat causes water molecules to separate from the onions' sugar molecules. As they cook, the dehydrated sugar molecules react with each other to form new molecules that produce new colors, flavors, and aromas. (This is the same series of reactions that



This soup is best finished under the broiler in oven-safe crocks. If using regular bowls, broil the cheese toasts separately.

occurs when granulated sugar is heated to make caramel.) Each time Henri deglazed the pan and allowed the onions to recaramelize, he was ratcheting up the flavor of the soup in a big way.

Back in the test kitchen with Henri's recipe in hand, I started cooking, and a long while later, the soup was on. It was as delicious as when Henri had made it, yet after standing at the stove for more than two hours, I barely had the energy to enjoy it. Was there a way to

borrow Henri's technique while cutting down on the active cooking time?

I cranked the heat from low to high to hurry the onions along, and my risk-taking was rewarded with burnt onions that ended up in the trash. I needed steady heat that wouldn't cause scorching—the stovetop was concentrating too much heat at the bottom of the pot. Why not use the oven? I spread oiled sliced onions on a baking sheet and roasted them at 450 degrees. Instead of caramelizing, however, they simply dried out. Lower temperatures caused the onions to steam. Next, I cooked as many sliced onions as I could squeeze into a Dutch oven (4 pounds), with far more promising results—the onions cooked slowly and evenly, building flavor all the while. After some trial and error, I finally settled on a method in which I cooked the onions covered in a 400-degree oven for an hour, then continued cooking with the lid ajar for another hour and a half.

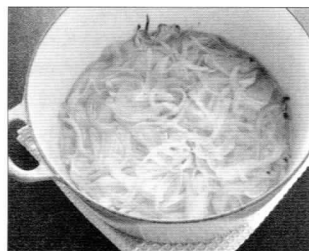
With my new hands-off method, the onions emerged from the oven golden, soft, and sweet, and a nice fond had begun to collect on the bottom of the pot. Even better, I'd only had to tend to them twice in 2½ hours. Next, I continued the caramelization process on the stovetop. Because of their head start in the oven, deglazing only three or four times was sufficient (the process still took nearly an hour—but this was far better than the two-plus hours Henri spent

STEP-BY-STEP GOLDEN ONIONS WITHOUT THE FUSS

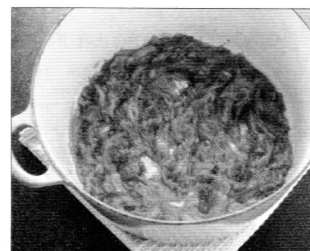
Forget constant stirring on the stovetop. Cooking onions in the oven takes time but requires little attention.



1. RAW The raw onions nearly fill a large Dutch oven.



2. AFTER 1 HOUR IN OVEN The onions are starting to wilt and release moisture.



3. AFTER 2½ HOURS IN OVEN The onions are golden, wilted, and significantly reduced in volume.

TECHNIQUE | TRIPLE DEGLAZE



Most recipes for French onion soup call for deglazing—loosening the flavorful dark brown crust, or fond, that forms on the bottom of the pot—only once, if at all. The secret to our recipe is to deglaze the pot at least three times.

on his dozens of deglazing). Once the onions were as dark as possible, I poured in a few splashes of dry sherry, which tasters preferred to sweet sherry, white wine, Champagne, red wine, and vermouth.

Finishing Touches

Settling on a type of onion from standard supermarket varieties was a snap. I quickly dismissed red onions—they bled out to produce a dingy-looking soup. White onions were too mild, and Vidalia onions made the broth candy-sweet. Yellow onions, on the other hand, offered just the sweet and savory notes I was after.

Henri had used only water for his soup, but after making batches with water, chicken broth, and beef broth alone and in combination, I decided the soup was best with all three. The broths added complexity, and my goal was to build as many layers of flavor as possible.

At last, I could focus on the soup's crowning glory: bread and cheese. So as to not obscure the lovely broth, I dialed back the hefty amounts that have come to define the topping in this country. Toasting the bread before floating a slice on the soup warded off sogginess. As for the cheese, Emmenthaler and Swiss were fine, but I wanted to stick to tradition. A modest sprinkling of nutty Gruyère (see "Gruyère Cheese," right) was a grand, gooey finish to a great soup.

BEST FRENCH ONION SOUP

SERVES 6

Sweet onions, such as Vidalia or Walla Walla, will make this recipe overly sweet. Be patient when caramelizing the onions in step 2; the entire process takes 45 to 60 minutes. Use broiler-safe crocks and keep the rim of the bowls 4 to 5 inches from the heating element to obtain a proper gratinée of melted, bubbly cheese. If using ordinary soup bowls, sprinkle the toasted bread slices with Gruyère and return them to the broiler until the cheese melts, then float them on top of the soup. We prefer Swanson Certified Organic Free Range Chicken Broth and Pacific Beef Broth. For the best flavor, make the soup a day or

2 in advance. Alternatively, the onions can be prepared through step 1, cooled in the pot, and refrigerated for up to 3 days before proceeding with the recipe.

Soup

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 3 pieces
- 6 large yellow onions (about 4 pounds), halved and cut pole to pole into ¼-inch-thick slices (see "Slicing Onions," page 30)
- Table salt
- 2 cups water, plus extra for deglazing
- ½ cup dry sherry
- 4 cups low-sodium chicken broth (see note above)
- 2 cups beef broth (see note above)
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme, tied with kitchen twine
- 1 bay leaf
- Ground black pepper

Cheese Croutons

- 1 small baguette, cut on bias into ½-inch slices
- 8 ounces Gruyère, shredded (about 2½ cups)

1. **FOR THE SOUP:** Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 400 degrees. Generously spray inside of heavy-bottomed large (at least 7-quart) Dutch oven with nonstick cooking spray. Place butter in pot and add onions and 1 teaspoon salt. Cook, covered, 1 hour (onions will be moist and slightly reduced in volume). Remove pot from oven and stir onions, scraping bottom and sides of pot. Return pot to oven with lid slightly ajar and continue to cook until onions are very soft and golden brown, 1½ to 1¾ hours longer, stirring onions and scraping bottom and sides of pot after 1 hour.

2. Carefully remove pot from oven and place over medium-high heat. Using oven mitts to handle pot, cook onions, stirring frequently and scraping bottom and sides of pot, until liquid evaporates and onions brown, 15 to 20 minutes, reducing heat to medium if onions are browning too quickly. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until pot bottom is coated with dark crust, 6 to 8 minutes, adjusting heat as necessary. (Scrape any fond that collects on spoon back into onions.) Stir in ¼ cup water, scraping pot bottom to loosen crust, and cook until water evaporates and pot bottom has formed another dark crust, 6 to 8 minutes. Repeat process of deglazing 2 or 3 more times, until onions are very dark brown. Stir in sherry and cook, stirring frequently, until sherry evaporates, about 5 minutes.

3. Stir in broths, 2 cups water, thyme, bay leaf, and ½ teaspoon salt, scraping up any final bits of browned crust on bottom and sides of pot. Increase heat to high and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer 30 minutes. Remove and discard herbs, then season with salt and pepper.

4. **FOR THE CROUTONS:** While soup simmers, arrange baguette slices in single layer on baking sheet and bake in 400-degree oven until bread is dry, crisp, and golden at edges, about 10 minutes. Set aside.

5. **TO SERVE:** Adjust oven rack 6 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Set individual

TASTING: Gruyère Cheese

Though its fame derives mainly from its use in fondue and French onion soup, Gruyère is also a table cheese revered for its creamy texture and savory flavor. Both Switzerland and France make authentic versions that are crafted from raw cow's milk and aged for the better part of a year in government-designated regions (the French cheese is called Gruyère de Comté). Though labeled "Gruyère," domestic cheeses of this type bear little resemblance to the real thing. Made from pasteurized cow's milk, they are aged for fewer months and have a rubbery texture and bland flavor. In fact, in a blind taste test of nine brands, tasters overwhelmingly panned the two domestic versions, likening one (from Boar's Head) to "plastic." Imported Gruyères, on the other hand, received raves. The top picks in the lineup were three reserve cheeses, aged 10 or more months to develop stronger flavor: the Gruyère Reserve carried by Whole Foods Market, Emmi Le Gruyère Reserve, and a Gruyère Salé from a Boston-area cheese shop. For complete tasting results, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/february.

—Elizabeth Bomze

broiler-safe crocks on baking sheet and fill each with about 1¾ cups soup. Top each bowl with 1 or 2 baguette slices (do not overlap slices) and sprinkle evenly with Gruyère. Broil until cheese is melted and bubbly around edges, 3 to 5 minutes. Let cool 5 minutes before serving.

QUICKER FRENCH ONION SOUP

This variation uses a microwave for the initial cooking of the onions, which dramatically reduces the cooking time. The soup's flavor, however, will not be quite as deep as with the stovetop method. If you don't have a microwave-safe bowl large enough to accommodate all of the onions, cook in a smaller bowl in 2 batches.

Follow recipe for Best French Onion Soup, combining onions and 1 teaspoon salt in large microwave-safe bowl and covering with large microwave-safe plate (plate should completely cover bowl and not rest on onions). Microwave on high power for 20 to 25 minutes until onions are soft and wilted, stirring halfway through cooking. (Use oven mitts to remove bowl from microwave and remove plate away from you to avoid steam burn.) Drain onions (about ½ cup liquid should drain off) and proceed with step 2, melting butter in Dutch oven before adding wilted onions.

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- Best French Onion Soup

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