

classic french onion soup gratinée

We've made hundreds of gallons of this soup and still can't get enough of it. Oddly, however, it's one of those dishes that too many cooks make incorrectly. We've seen recipes call for everything from soy sauce to Worcester sauce to balsamic vinegar. Others want the onions to cook until they all but fall apart. All this extra stuff makes a simple and satisfying dish way too complicated. It's really very easy to make and requires only a few ingredients, some patience and a hot oven.

1/3 pound butter
3 yellow onions, sliced with the grain of the onion then cut into 1-inch lengths (This is to make it easier to eat the soup with a spoon. There is nothing worse than onion dribbling down your chin.)

1/2 handful flour
1 cup red wine
2 sprigs thyme
7 cups chicken stock

olive oil
8 slices of day-old baguette, sliced to 1/2-inch thick
8 slices of cheese

The traditional **cheese** is a French cheese called *Comté*. You can also use Gruyère, Emmental or Swiss cheese. Some American-made cheeses that would also fit the bill are: Roth Kase's Grand Cru Gruyère or Upland's Pleasant Ridge out of Wisconsin. Here in Michigan, Grassfield's Edam. Don't use provolone or mozzarella as they're much too rich and get stringy. The Swiss/Gruyère style cheeses offer a bite that counters the oniony richness of the soup.

for the soup:

Put the butter into a 4-quart pan and melt over medium-low heat. Add the onions and season with salt and pepper. For the next 30 minutes, let the onions cook slowly. *Slowly* is the key word here. If you cook them too quickly, their natural **sweetness** won't come out.

Sweat the onions, making sure to stir frequently with a wooden spoon, especially after all the water has evaporated. The onions will not begin to color until all that liquid is gone, and you'll have to pay close attention so they don't burn to the bottom of the pan. Your attention will be rewarded though, once the onions start to turn a beautiful, **golden brown**.

The color of the onions is very important. Too little color (too white) and the flavor will not develop correctly; your soup will be characterless. Too much color (very brown) and the flavor will be too strong. **Golden brown** is the color you're looking for. Golden brown gives you a rich, mellow soup.

Sometimes you'll see sugar called for in an onion soup recipe; this is because the recipe is asking you to cook the onions too quickly, thus missing out on the onions' natural **sweetness**, and even inviting a hint of bitterness. But, if cooked correctly—and by *correctly* we mean slow, *patient cooking*—then no sugar is needed. Mom would be proud.

Once you have the right color, sprinkle in a half-handful of flour while stirring with the wooden spoon. Basically, what you're making is a *roux*, a classic French thickening agent. Only add enough flour to lightly coat the onions—you don't want to make wallpaper paste. Stir in the red wine, add the sprig of thyme and finally, the chicken stock. Turn up the heat to bring to a boil, then turn down to a simmer. Simmer for 30 minutes. Adjust the seasoning.

for the croutons:

In an 8-inch frying pan, pour enough olive oil to fill the bottom to a 1/4-inch. Turn the heat to medium-high. When the oil is hot (you can check this by dipping a corner of your sliced baguette in the oil to see if it fries) fry 4 pieces at a time until golden brown. Turn the slices over and fry on the other side until golden brown. Do this for all the bread. Drain the croutons on a paper towel.

to finish:

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Ladle the soup into 8-ounce, ovenproof cups, leaving 1/4-inch at the top. Put two **croutons** on top of the soup.

Over the croutons, place 2 slices of cheese, making sure to crisscross them so there are 8 corners showing, not 4. Place the cups on a baking tray and bake in the oven for about 15 minutes, or until the cheese is nice and brown and bubbly. Serve the hot cups on napkin-covered plates. (The napkin keeps the cup from moving around on the plate.)

You may need to get creative fitting these **croutons** in the bowl! Sometimes they are just too big and you'll need to break one up. The important thing is that the croutons cover the entire top of the soup. Don't break them up so small that you end up with crumbs.

The best way to transfer the soup cups hot from the oven is to fold a towel into a long strip and use it like an oven mitt with each end for each hand. Sometimes the cheese will drip down during baking, sticking the bowl to the pan; a gentle twist of the cup will loosen it.

THERE'S SOME CONTROVERSY over what's actually "classic" in this recipe. For example, some say you have to use beef broth for the soup to truly be "classic." Some say the wine must be Port. There's no real consensus on the matter no matter how far back you go. These days, Joel Robochon uses chicken stock, and since he's one of the best chefs of the 20th century I am willing to bet it's okay. Personally, I like chicken stock because it doesn't overpower the soup, thus allowing us to better taste the onions.

—E.P.

