



a note on ...
Buckwheat Crêpes

If the women [of Brittany] show any zeal or competence in the kitchen, it is in the art of making pancakes out of buckwheat flour. The cakes are as thin as wafers, and have to be folded up several times before they begin to have a serious consistency. Such being their character, they are rarely eaten otherwise than with the fingers; they therefore tend to uphold the deeply-rooted contempt for forks which is another peculiarity of the Breton.

— Edward Harrison Baker, **Wayfaring in France** (1890)

When I was rhapsodizing about the crêpe as an model for locavore consumption, I have to confess that I was playing a little fast and loose with the facts. It's quite true that poorer Bretons ate what was mostly grown or raised in the land around them, but their soil was too poor to successfully grow wheat. What it was perfectly suited for was growing buckwheat.

Buckwheat isn't even a grain; it's a seed produced by a plant of the same family as sorrel, knotweed, and rhubarb. It may be nutritious, it may be tasty, but because it contains no gluten it can't be turned into a decent loaf of bread.* Buckwheat didn't arrive in Brittany until the 15th century, when it buried itself as deeply into the region's soul as it did in Russia. In both places, it was eaten as a porridge and made into little flat cakes, blini† and crêpes (or, as they are sometimes called, galettes).‡

Given that my interest in crêpes started with the wheat variety, I wasn't even sure I wanted to write about the buckwheat kind. But I did feel a little guilty about ignoring them entirely, given their historical importance (see just above). Then, when I read this passage from Paul Bocuse in his **Regional French Cooking**, I knew I was going to have to give it a shot.

I do not know if there are Breton households in which crêpes are still made on a black cast-iron *billig* [originally, a cast-iron griddle set on a tripod over a fire. Now you can get an electric model]. The taste of buckwheat crêpes is inimitable: crisp and light, with a little salted butter melting in the center. I can do without the fillings—ham, egg, sausage or andouille—even if *la crêpe garnie* is currently in fashion. I have nothing against them, but please spare us crêpes filled with merguez sausage or ratatouille, which do, unfortunately, exist.

Alas, despite the clarity of Bocuse's recipe, my first attempt at these crêpes was pretty much a disaster

* Yes, I know, there are many recipes for buckwheat bread, but if you check them you'll find that it's there for its flavor; wheat of some sort does the heavy lifting. The only recipe I found for an all-buckwheat bread was one for buckwheat yeast rolls in Jean Redwood's **Russian Food: All The Peoples, All The Republics** (reviewed, with several other Russian cookbooks, in SC•29). Published before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the book is a rich source for rye, barley, and buckwheat breads from all over Eastern Europe.

† Blini are now usually made with the addition of white flour, but you can find an old-time recipe that makes them with nothing but buckwheat in Elena Molokhovet's classic **A Gift to Young Housewives** (1861).

‡ To quote directly from **France: A Culinary Journey**: "The difference is really linguistic: the pancakes served at home in Haute Bretagne are called *galettes*, and those served in Basse Bretagne are called crêpes. Both are served in *crêperies*, the *galettes* usually being the savory buckwheat ones, and the crêpes those with sweet fillings."

— reminding me once again that problems about "clarity" in recipe writing are as much about what isn't said as about what is expressed badly. In this instance, I had three major problems with Bocuse's recipe (and the others I consulted — they're all very similar). The first (which has yet to be overcome) is my complete ignorance about the characteristics of Breton-grown buckwheat.

Despite the fact that the French term for buckwheat is *blé noir*, or "black wheat," the page-size color photograph in the Bocuse book showed crêpes that were thin as paper and a delicately light brown. Mine, made with buckwheat flour from Bob's Red Mill, more resembled Swedish *knäckebröd* — which is to say they were such a dark gray that it was difficult to see if their surface had browned at all. Worse, the word "inimitable" could only be deployed here in the worst possible sense ... as in "only remotely edible."

Fortunately, the solution was shoved back in memory's pantry, and I had only to poke around to pull it out. Back in 1988, I wrote about Matt's and my adventures making sourdough buckwheat pancakes (the essay is in **Serious Pig**), when we discovered the light buckwheat flour grown in northern Maine by the Bouchard family. Their principal product is a pancake mix for making *ployes*, a traditional pancake eaten by the descendents of Acadians who had moved to the Upper Saint John River Valley on the Maine-New Brunswick border. *Ployes* are made with a mix of wheat and buckwheat flour, leavened with baking soda. For this mix, the Bouchards grow a distinctively lighter silverskin buckwheat. You can buy the flour they mill from this, and it turned out to be perfect for my needs.*

The other problem had to do with the batter itself. Buckwheat is not only not wheat, it doesn't behave like wheat when mixed into a batter. It has a slightly mucilaginous quality which resists being spread thinly, even when well diluted (it is amazingly absorptive.)

My solution was to age the batter overnight. The crêpes thus produced were as thin as I wanted, but they were covered with tiny craters — almost like fried foam. That was because the wet batter produced a wealth of bubbles that were immediately fixed in place by the high heat. (Also, see comments in the excerpt from *The English Illustrated Magazine* on page 2 below.)

To tell the truth, I was perfectly happy with these crêpes — since they were very tasty and no one was looking at them but me. However, this does bring me to the third problem, which is that I don't like buckwheat crêpes nearly as much as the wheaten ones. If I had never tasted the latter, I would be pleased enough with the buckwheat variety. But I *had* tasted them, and the buckwheat version was a lesson in the difference between something that's amazingly delicious — delicate, simultaneously crisp and tender, toasty and buttery — and something which, for all its good qualities, is curiously inert.

This, in short, is why — interesting though they are — they've been relegated to a side note. However, if you're looking for a gluten-free, very nutritious whole-grain breakfast option, they are well worth a try, especially if you can lay hands on some light buckwheat flour.

* As of November 2012, a 3-pound bag of their buckwheat flour sells for \$16, including shipping. The *ployes* pancake mix is the same price for the same amount, plus the same free shipping. Bouchard Family Farm, 3 Strip Road, Fort Kent ME 04743; 1-800-239-3237. Their website — www.ployes.com — offers more pricing options and a lot of fascinating information.

Buckwheat Crêpes

Same thoughts about the butter, eggs, and milk used here as those shared before. Most buckwheat crêpe recipes add some white all-purpose flour for reasons not clear to me — perhaps to soften the buckwheat taste a bit (good luck with that) or to add some gluten. Instead, I suggest you go in the *opposite* direction, making the crêpes with light buckwheat flour and adding a little of the darker stuff to up the buckwheat flavor. Change the proportions of the two as you like. I'm serious in recommending that the batter rest in the refrigerator overnight, but others feel differently. When you mix the batter the first time, make a few crêpes (the first never works out, no matter what) and keep the result in mind when you make the rest of them the next morning.

[MAKES ABOUT 12 CRÊPES]

¼ cup buckwheat flour

1 cup light buckwheat flour

½ teaspoon salt

2 eggs

2 tablespoons melted butter, plus
more for greasing the pan

1½ cups milk or water (to start)

- Mix the two buckwheat flours in a large bowl. Sprinkle over the salt. In another bowl, beat together the eggs, the butter, and the liquid until well blended. Slowly turn this mixture into the dry ingredients, whisking as you do so that the result is an easily pourable batter. If making some test crêpes, do so now; otherwise transfer the batter to a pitcher, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate overnight.

- Heat a crêpe pan or 8-inch skillet over medium-high heat for 3 or 4 minutes. It must be very hot. Brush the pan with a little of the melted butter. Then lower the heat slightly and, tilting the pan with one hand and pouring the batter from the pitcher with the other, add just enough batter to coat the bottom of the pan, pouring any excess back into the pitcher. (You can use a small ladle instead — the better option if you're a beginner at this.)

- Once the batter solidifies, give the pan a sharp jerk to make sure the crêpe isn't sticking, then, after, say, 30 seconds, start using a spatula or palette knife to peek under and see how things are going. Once the crêpe has browned to your liking, flip it over. Give it half a minute on the other side, then slide it onto a heated plate.

- At this point you'll discover at once if you need to mix in more liquid (the crêpe is too thick) or adjust the heat (the crêpe won't brown; the crêpe bursts into flames). Otherwise, quickly rip it apart and eat it before anyone else can see it. The ones that follow will be more comely.

- Repeat above steps until all the batter is gone.

- Serve immediately. I particularly like buckwheat crêpes wrapped around breakfast sausage (*never merguez*), but other options include grated cheese, scrambled eggs, etc.

Mentioned in the Issue

How To Flip Crêpes.

Virginia Pasley and Jane Green. **You Can Do Anything with Crêpes:** "Men find this method a lot of fun, and it isn't hard to learn to do it. Here's how: When the first side of the crêpe is cooked, shake the pan gently backward and forward and sideways to be sure the crêpe is free. Now start shaking it more vigorously and at the same time give the pan a little twisting upward



flip. If the crêpe doesn't rise out of the pan, flip it a little harder. At first it may only turn over and catch the edge of the pan. Turn it by hand and try again. If you flip it too hard and without the little twist necessary to turn it, the crêpe may land on the stove—or even on the floor. Don't be discouraged. After a few casualties you will be flipping with ease for an admiring audience."

To Let Batter Rest ... Or Not. Harold McGee, **On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen:**

"The batter is carefully mixed to minimize gluten formation, allowed to stand for an hour or more to allow the proteins and damaged starch to absorb water and air bubbles to rise and escape, and then cooked for just a couple of minutes per side." **VERSUS** Andrea Geary, "Fool-proof Crêpes" in *Cook's Illustrated* (May & June 2011): "[B]ut I also hadn't yet tackled the central controversy about whether or not to rest the batter. The traditional justification is twofold: First, resting allows the starch granules in the flour to hydrate more fully, which purportedly produces a more tender crêpe. Second, a rest means that there's time for any air incorporated into the batter during mixing to dissipate, so the crêpe will be as thin as possible. Curious, I made a batch of crêpe batter and placed it in the fridge. Then, just to take the resting test to the extreme, I waited two hours ... Tasters compared the crêpes [and found] no clear winner. ... The resting seemed [not to make] any noticeable difference. ♦

The Historical Crêpe

1869 ~ Fanny Bury Palliser

We descended to the kitchen of the farmer who rents the house, which now belongs to the Tocqueville family. His wife was busily employed in making "crêpes," a favorite kind of cake in Normandy and Brittany. It is made generally of the flour of the sarrasin or buckwheat, mixed with milk and water, and spread into a kind of pancake, which is fried on an iron pan, resembling the Scotch griddlecakes. Another variety, called a "galette," is made of the same ingredients, but differs from the crêpe in being made three or four times the thickness, and is therefore not so light. Though generally made of buckwheat, wheat- or oat-flour is sometimes used; and in the towns, sugar and cinnamon and vanilla are added, and the simple character of the crêpe entirely changed under the hands of the confectioner.

1886 ~ The English Illustrated Magazine

As the grain [buckwheat] is in appearance unlike our common wheat, so is the bread that is made from it—the veritable bread of the Brittany peasant. To prepare it for the table a paste made of the flour is formed into circular cakes (called galettes or crêpes) almost a foot across and as thin as a penny piece. These cakes are very slightly baked, so slightly indeed that the galette is quite soft and flexible, and in this state is frequently folded over twice in order that it may be carried in a small basket. Its texture is not unlike that of a crumpet, which, indeed, it more nearly resembles than anything else to which I can compare it. It is more palatable even in this flabby condition of "cold crumpet" than would be expected, but is really delicious when fried with butter and glazed with a beaten-up egg. I mention these particulars because at the hotels in Brittany these buckwheat cakes are considered quite unfit for the polite traveller, and un-

less he should go out of the beaten track and familiarize himself somewhat with the peasant life he may probably never so much as see one. Considering how often their ordinary bread is of poor quality and wretchedly sour, it is to be wished that the galette were sometimes regarded by the hotel-keepers as an available substitute. A kind of porridge made of buckwheat is regularly eaten by the peasants, who, however, occasionally vary the recipe by breaking up a galette into a bowl of milk.

1901 ~ The Picayune Creole Cook Book

Many there are in New Orleans today who remember the delightful old-time crêpe parties that the belles and beaux used to give. The word would go from mouth to mouth that some great, cheery kitchen in the rue Esplanade, the rue Royale or the rue Rampart would be at the disposal of the young folks for the evening for a crêpe party, and thither the young gallants and numbers of "Ma Belle Créole" would gather, and the dexterity with which a young lady could toss a crêpe was often the open sesame to some young man's heart. The great secret in tossing a crêpe was to do it with accuracy and celerity and so neatly that it would settle down in its place in the frying pan just as though it had not been touched, with no rough edges around, and as smooth and round as a young globe. The old black Creole cooks prided themselves on the way that they could toss a crêpe, and the great secret that they had mastered in making them as thin as possible, and exceedingly tender.

As the crêpes were tossed by the girls, they were caught by the young men and piled on a hot plate. Then they were served hot, with butter and molasses, or were each spread with sugar and cinnamon and butter, mixed and rolled. There was as much art in rolling the crêpes as in serving them. But more generally they were simply buttered and rolled in our unexcelled Louisiana molasses, or "La Cuite," the deposit of sugar which comes from the molasses.

These innocent diversions of long ago, like the old-time molasses candy pullings, or *soirees de candi tiré*, and the quaint old-time *eau sucrée** parties, have passed out of the life of the old French quarter. They are among the most gentle memories of those ancient days.

Crêpes are made as follows, the quantity of ingredients given below being sufficient for six persons.

8 Eggs • 3/4 lb. Flour • 1 Cup Milk • 4 Teaspoons Salt

Beat the yolks and whites of the eggs together. Then add the flour, and beat very light. Add the milk, pouring gradually, and having the batter no thicker than cream. Add the salt, and mix well. Now comes the most important part, the baking. Unless this is properly done, your labor has fallen to naught. Have a wide pancake pan, and let it be very hot. Grease it with butter, or, better still, with a piece of fat bacon. This is the safest way, as you will not have a pancake swimming in grease, a most undesirable offering at any table. Pour in batter sufficient to just cover the bottom of the pan. In a minute, or perhaps less time,

**Eau sucrée* is a simple syrup made by thoroughly dissolving a tablespoon of sugar in a glass of water. As this book explains, the Creoles swore by it as a digestive and routinely drank it at the end a heavy meal. More interestingly, an *eau sucrée* party was a gathering where everyone understood that they were there for the socializing, not the food, and that only *eau sucrée* or lemonade and cake would be offered. Thus, "the poor young woman who entertained was placed on an equal with her richer sister ... and the faubourg laughed and sang and danced, night after night, on Iced *Eau Sucrée*, or Iced Lemonade and Orgeats, and Ice Creams, with as much zest as when grand suppers were spread and champagne flowed."



the cake must be ready to turn.

This is the critical moment that the old Creole cooks used to understand so well. By a peculiar sleight of hand that comes only by experience, the cake was tossed and caught in the pan, and the brown side was brought up without failure, and the cake lay just as smooth as though untouched. Those who wish to learn the art must begin slowly at first. If you have never tossed a pancake, and attempt to do it before you have caught the "trick," as the old Creole cooks used to call it, you will make a miserable failure, and have only a mingled heap of batter. Go slowly, and learn.

The old black cooks used to say, when one of their number could toss a crêpe to the top of the chimney, and bring it down again slick and smooth, with the brown side up, tossing minute after minute, "like lightning," that the woman was "for sure one hoodoo, and the old devil himself had taught her to toss and fry." But the pancakes thus tossed savored neither of fire nor brimstone, and, when rolled up with infinite art and ready to serve hot on a dainty china dish, many were the encomiums that masters and mistresses bestowed upon their faithful old slaves. Crêpes may be served as an entrée at breakfast, dinner or supper. They make an excellent luncheon dish.

1902 ~ Waverley Root, The Food of France

The one culinary specialty for which Brittany is really noted is crêpes — pancakes. The Breton pancake is less coarse than the American griddlecake, but is still a rather heavy product. It may have been the ancestor of the crêpe Suzette, a most delicate derivation, but it compares with it as a gnarled and weatherbeaten farmer with an elegant Parisienne—although the line of descent does pass through a Breton creation of great finesse, the crêpe dentelle (lancelike pancake) of Quimperle. The ordinary solid Breton crêpe, though hardly subtle, is by no means a dish to be despised, and it has the advantage of filling you to repletion at minute cost.

For some reason, a little cluster of Breton pancake places has grown up in Paris around the boulevard Saint-Germain, about midway between Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the boulevard Saint-Michel (off-base, for the classic Breton quarter in Paris is behind the Gare Montparnasse), where I go occasionally for crêpes. There is no style. The cook officiates in the dining room in full view of the diners, behind a battery of enormous griddles constantly smoking with batter in various stages of cooking. The only thing on the menu is crepes. I usually order one crepe with butter and eggs or cheese as the main course, and another with jelly or honey for dessert, washed down with a glass or two of cider—the standard liquid accompaniment—and stagger heavily out, hardly lightened at all in the pocketbook.

1840 ~ The Last Word

You no longer see a goodly array of fitches of bacon in the cottages of the peasants. Many of them do not even get the black bread of the sarazin [buckwheat]. They make a sort of cake, called "galette," by pouring into a hot frying-pan a portion of a thin sort of gruel, made of sarazin meal. This assumes almost the consistency of leather, and is in appearance the nastiest food which can be conceived.

— T. Adolphus Trollope, *A Summer in Brittany*

Further Thoughts on Salting

After I finished my review of **Salting** I realized I had said nothing about the recipes. This is because this wasn't a book I had intended to review, just read for my own interest. I gave a cursory glance at the recipes, then forgot about them entirely. This was unfair to the book, and certainly negligent of the reviewer, because the recipes do add to the whole experience of the work, as well as to its usefulness.

The recipe section starts, appropriately enough, discussing the sensual pleasure that comes from sprinkling salt on raw food and directly eating it:

Part of the sensation comes from the texture of crunchy crystal against the yielding ingredients. Part comes from the timeless minerality of the sea playing on the fleeting flavors of the flesh. But the overwhelming power of salting uncooked food comes from salt's chemical and physical effect on the palate, the chain reaction of the ionic violence that sends cells bursting and juices rushing.

Here, at last, is a passage where the prose style exactly fits the subject, and has exactly the effect the author intends: to wet the mouth. And the first recipe, a recipe for an unsalted loaf of bread to be eaten with unsalted butter and a pinch of *sel gris* works to the same end. (At least to me. My fantasy of the perfect last meal often decides that this will be freshly made toast, spread with sweet butter, and lightly sprinkled with shattered crystals of Maldon sea salt.) Other such pleasures include radishes with sweet butter and *fleur de sel*, and a log of chèvre coated with Cyprus black flake salt and cacao nibs.

The chapter on curing is commendably short and simple — taken seriously, the subject would require a whole separate book. But the first recipe, for gravlax, is prepared by pressing the salmon between two salt blocks, which is to say, large slabs of Himalayan salt. Later, there is a whole chapter on cooking with salt blocks, mostly cut into slabs but in one instance (for serving chocolate fondue) carved into a bowl.

This is the moment to introduce something else that annoyed me about the book. Bitterman calls himself a “selmelier,” a word he invented, but which unfortunately threatens to become widespread. Here is a quote from a web site written by Kathryn Vercillo that helpfully explains:

Gourmet salt adds its own unique flavor to the item that it goes atop of. People are increasingly interested in this trend but they typically do not have enough experience with gourmet salts to confidently select the right types of salt for their meals. Many people don't want to take the risk of choosing the “wrong” salt and having a meal that they don't enjoy because of the poor decision. For that reason, diners are interested in [selmeliers] at restaurants, people who will advise them about their salt options and explain why they recommend one over another for a particular dish.

Choosing the wrong salt: another terror added to the experience of fine dining. At least at the restaurant you can wave the selmelier away. Not at Bitterman's own store, however, where

there are virtually no written signs ... because we consider it our job to learn about our customer's needs, then educate them in person about what we have to offer based on what we've learned.

The author must think cornering customers like this is ultimately helpful. But when no other choice exists, it is also unabashedly intrusive, and I began to find it hard to differentiate between helpfulness and hustle.

I might be wrong: it may be your dream come true to learn you can fry eggs and bacon on a salt slab — a

hefty chunk of mineral that takes 45 minutes to reach cooking temperature, probably nearly as much time to cool down (he doesn't say), and which may break apart (“sometimes violently”) while being used. His description of the result ...

the sheen of salt simmering underneath the egg and bacon instead of on top, and a jumble of textures — creamy, crunchy, chewy, juicy, fatty, fleshy, and eggy

... is none of it attributable to the salt slab, except for that “shimmering” sheen of salt beneath. Most of us, however, prefer not to salt our bacon, or have a layer of salt under our eggs.

I'm not saying that a salt slab isn't interesting, but what is lacking here is a sense of proportion: devoting a chapter plus to salt slabs teeters precariously on the edge of preciousness, and so do many of the recipes that call for specific artisanal salts: *sel gris* for sauerkraut; *sugpo asin** for roasted chicken; Cyprus hardwood-smoked flake salt for grilled sesame salmon. This last recipe calls for black and white sesame seeds, ginger, Szechuan peppercorns, and (for those who have a better equipped pantry than I) sesame *leaves*. Happy the palate that can pick out the characteristic “pastry-like crackle” and “lilt of golden salt” in that *mélange*.

The apotheosis of all this — the preciousness, the cringe-making metaphors, the one-note palate — can be found in his passage on salting pasta water.

Salting your pasta water is like rearing children: generosity doesn't spoil them, neglect does. Tradition, which is a great guide for pasta, says to salt your water to the taste of the sea, which is 3.5 percent salt in the great oceans. A gallon of water weighs 8.35 pounds (the United Kingdom's imperial gallon weighs 10 pounds), so bringing a gallon of fresh water to 3.5 percent salinity takes about 4.5 ounces of salt. But the Italians live on the Mediterranean Sea, which at about 3.8 percent is even saltier than the ocean. So figure an easy 4 to 5 ounces of salt for pasta water. This is two handfuls (about ½ cup) of salt per gallon of water! It's a lot, but salt your pasta heavily and the dish will behave itself wonderfully, and oftentimes there will be no need to salt the sauce at all.

Take pasta, well-seasoned from salted pasta water and cooked al dente, and add fresh vegetables and herbs or some lightly sautéed garlic, cream, and white wine. The flavors are left free in their childlike innocence to pursue butterflies across a blond pasture of fresh noodles.

How off course can you get? Most Italians don't live on the Mediterranean Sea; historically, given the nature of its mountainous geography, most had never seen it, and I'm sure that's true for many Italians today.† Furthermore, I've never heard of any tradition of salting pasta water to the concentration of seawater, and why would there be? A half-cup of salt to a gallon of water is about pickling, not pasta making. He goes on to say that

heavily salted pasta water allows more salt to be absorbed into the pasta as it cooks. This gives the pasta more flavor, sure, but it also sets up the pasta to play the role that Italian tradition has defined for it as the foundation for fresh ingredients or a sauce.

But heavily salted pasta water doesn't enhance the taste of pasta, it drowns it in saltiness. And, I'm sorry, but in the Italian tradition a dish of pasta is its own *raison d'être*; it doesn't serve as the foundation of anything. The sauce

*[A] king among salts, glowing rose-cloud white, lush and firmly crunchy, with dulcet brine notes that play lavishly (but with discipline) against the sweet tamed gaminess of poultry....”

† And don't get me started on the several seas — Tyrrhenian, Ligurian, Ionian, Adriatic — that *actually* surround Italy.

is there to enhance it, and so are any other ingredients. The truth is that this passage isn't about the glories of pasta at all; it's about salt, salt, salt. The tongue wilts.

Essentially, the simpler the recipe, the more likely the character of individual artisanal salts will stand out — oysters on the half shell with Shinkai deep sea salt; potato chips with fleur de sel de Guérane. And I was amused by his notion of popcorn salted with six different artisanal salts (fortunately not with all of them at once).

That said, the only reason to include a recipe for popcorn or raw radishes with butter is for the recommended salt choices. And I find it hard to believe that few if any of these dishes are noticeably better with the salt he mentions. If the popcorn, the potato chips were salted with Iburi-Jio cherry-smoked sea salt, would we think, Whoa, not nearly as good....

Of course, this is something that readers will have to decide for themselves. What I can say about this book is that after reading it I went and bought two salt mills to use with the artisanal salts (both from the Maine Sea Salt Company; one plain, the other smoked) that have been gathering dust in my pantry. I'm glad I did — I now use them all the time.

On the other hand, I was on the verge of buying a few other artisanal salts but practicality stayed my hand. If I could buy a reasonably priced "tasting set" of ten or fifteen different such salts in half-ounce sample bags, I probably would — and perhaps then I'd get interested in figuring out which salt would go best with a particular dish. After all, I do this with chile peppers and dried mushrooms. But I'm not about to start buying these salts in bulk, no matter how evocative their description. It's one thing to be fascinated by how many artisanal salts are out there, by their subtleties of geography and craft. But even if I trusted Bitterman more, I still wouldn't want them crowding up a kitchen shelf. In my heart of hearts, I think I can make better use of that space ... and of my grocery money. ♦

More on *Erbswurst*

The Professor says: "So what does this *Erbswurst* taste like? Well, rip open the foil wrapping and you'll find six large tablets — what in the old days you'd have called horse pills — each of which makes a cup of pea soup. The limits of my German being what they are (*ein, zwei, drei*), I ignored the rest of the directions, including the word *zerdrücken*, figuring that once I had the proportions, there was nothing else I needed to know. Heat water to boiling, add tablet, stir. Boy, was I wrong. And I made matters worse by deciding to make my first cup with *Milch* and top it with a little piece of *Butter*.

"I poured the milk in a cup and gave it a zap in the microwave, dropped in the horse pill, and stirred. Nothing happened. I stirred some more, and some more again. In fact, for the next half hour it was stir stir stir stir zap, stir stir stir stir stir zap, repeat until fingers fall off. The big problem (I mean besides the fact the tablet was insoluble) was that milk is opaque. I couldn't see what was happening. When I thought I had finally got everything mixed together, I slowly poured the milk into another cup so I could see what sort of dregs were left. Instead, I found most of the tablet, albeit reduced to several large lumps. I couldn't face another half hour of



Hanging Out at the No-Name A few additional notes ...

stirring and zapping, so I poured the sodden detritus onto a plate and mashed it viciously with a fork. So did I learn the meaning of an important German word: *zerdrücken* (crush, mash, squash, pulp, etc.) *before* adding to liquid.

"No surprise that the pea soup itself was a bit anticlimactic; it would have had to taste like ambrosia to have been worth all that labor. It was delicately flavorful, not at all overly salty, just the thing to make for yourself (following the directions!!) before you go to bed. Slice in a knockwurst and you'd have a quick and decent lunch. And that's about all I can say.

"If the foregoing has got you panting for your very own tube of *Erbswurst*, you probably forgot to take your meds this morning. Still, I'm happy to point the way. I ordered mine (one tube of the yellow label variety, which has flecks of bacon in it, and one tube of the green label (which has flecks of salt pork) from www.germanshop24.com, where the price is low and the shipping cost is high, since it comes direct from Germany. Or you can order it from a supplier in the USA — www.reproprations.com. These guys — disabled American Vets — sell field-ration reproductions from the various armies that fought on both sides in both World Wars, all of it edible. The downside is that their price for *Erbswurst* is high, and their shipping rate is higher."

No-Name Beer-Braised Beef & Onions

The Professor says: "I first had this dish — well, something like it — when I stopped at Moody's Diner up in Waldoboro, Maine. I always order the fried tripe, but if I'm really hungry, I have it as an appetizer and get something else as well. This was a Saturday, and on the "specials" menu was beef and onions. Sounded good, so I asked for some. The waitress hesitated when I gave my order, but a quick glance at me persuaded her to keep any cautions to herself. After all, I'm a big boy. Truth is, though, I did over-order and had to have the last handful of French fries packed in a doggy bag. But I liked the smothered beef and onions enough to buy one of the copies of **What's Cooking At Moody's Diner** stacked by the cash register. More fool me — the book should have been called **What's NOT Cooking at Moody's Diner — And Never Will Be**. On the one hand, molded fruit salad, turkey and broccoli quiche, and "Pizzasagne"!?? On the other, no recipe for fried tripe or for smothered beef and onions. Jesus wept.

"Well, as I say, I'm a big boy — I can take the hit. I went home and worked up a version that's better than Moody's — no flour thickener, lots of beer and sautéed onions. And, of course, those squirts of mustard and ketchup. Those aren't there to provide some sort of "diner credentials" but because I was inspired to add them and was pleased with the result. The mustard gives the dish an almost imperceptible edge; the ketchup a bit of tang.

"I encountered only one problem, and that's because I wanted to serve the beef and onions on egg noodles. You can't cook up a mess of those in the morning and hope to serve them for lunch unless you're into cutting wedges

from the resulting big, solid lump and call it noodle pudding. But, after a little tinkering, I solved that problem, too. Result: sells out every time it's one of the No-Name's daily specials (served up on Saturday, naturally)."

[SERVES 4]

- 1 to 1½ pounds beef chuck
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt • black pepper to taste
- 2 cloves of garlic, minced small
- 5 or 6 medium onions, peeled and cut into bite-size pieces
- 1 12-ounce bottle of your regular brew — Miller, Rolling Rock, Budweiser, whatever
- 1 tablespoon each mustard and ketchup

• Trim the beef of any large pieces of fat and all gristle, saving the first and discarding the second. Cut the beef into bite-size pieces. Put 1 tablespoon of the oil, half the minced garlic, roughly half the salt, and some black pepper into a medium-size bowl and mix them together with your fingers. Add the cubes of beef and toss well.

• Pour all this into a Dutch oven set over a medium-hot flame and sauté until the beef is seared all over. Then turn out the beef (juices included) into a bowl. Return the pot to the flame.

• Put the reserved pieces of beef fat into the pot along with the remaining tablespoon of oil. Let the mixture heat until the pieces of beef fat start to sizzle, about 3 or 4 minutes, stir in the chopped onion and sprinkle over the remaining salt. Lower the flame to medium low and, stirring regularly, sauté the onions until most their edges are browned. Don't hurry this and burn them — it should take about 25 minutes. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 350°F.

• When the onions are ready, pick out any visible pieces of beef fat and discard. Turn in the waiting meat plus all its juices. Stir in the remaining minced garlic. Let everything cook together for 2 minutes, stirring well, then pour in the bottle of beer and stir in the mustard and ketchup.

• Cover the Dutch oven, put it into the preheated oven, and cook until the meat is tender and most of the beer absorbed — about 50 minutes. Meanwhile, start a large pot of water boiling, and cook the noodles, if you want to serve these as well.

"The trick I worked out to serve portions of noodles with individual orders of the beer-braised beef and onions was to cook them, drain them, shake them dry, and immediately toss them in vegetable oil (seasoned with a little extra minced garlic). This kept the noodles from sticking together, and when an order came in, I'd just toss some onto the grill, turn them over a couple of times to let them heat through, then plate them and ladle on the beef. Obviously, since you'll be serving all the noodles at once, there's no real reason to twice-cook them, except for the fact that this definitely improves them and the contrast works to the advantage of the entire dish."

[SERVES 4]

- 1 tablespoon cooking oil (olive oil is very nice)
 - 1 small garlic clove, finely minced (optional)
 - 12-ounce package of egg noodles, cooked in salted water according to package directions
- Put the oil and minced garlic (if using) in a large mixing bowl and stir them together. Cook the noodles, drain, and shake dry. Turn these into the bowl with the oil and garlic and toss well. Then turn everything out into a large skillet and set over medium heat. Cook, stirring, until the noodles are a bit dry and chewy. Portion them into four large soup bowls and ladle the beer-infused beef and onions over them. Serve at once with a tossed salad or whatever you like. ★

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