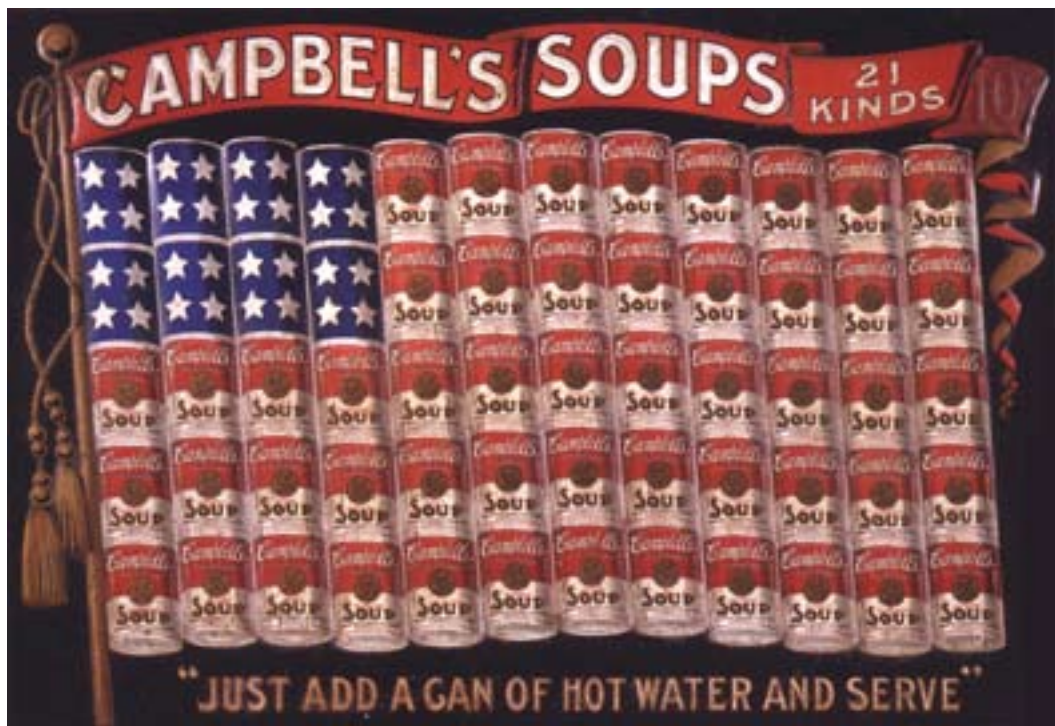




Simple Cooking

Electronic Edition



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Conflicted About Casseroles

The French name “casserole” has a certain amount of terror for the American housewife. The foreign word startles her and awakens visions of cooking as done by a Parisian *chef*, or by one who has made the culinary art his profession. She, a plain, everyday housekeeper, would not dare aspire to the use of a casserole. And yet the casserole itself is no more appalling than a saucepan. It is simply a covered dish, made of fireproof pottery, which will stand the heat of the oven or the top of the range. And the dainty cooked in this dish is “casserole” of chicken, rice, etc., as the case may be. Like many another object of dread this, when once known, is converted into a friend.

—MARION HARLAND’S COMPLETE COOK BOOK (1903)

HOW THINGS CHANGE. I thought of Marion Harland and this passage when, exactly one hundred years later, I was asked to write a blurb for a new cookbook by Jim Villas, *CRAZY ABOUT CASSEROLES: 275 ALL-AMERICAN HOT-DISH CLASSICS*.^{*} Housewives have now so much lost their fear of the casserole that the word rarely if ever “awakens visions of cooking as done by a Paris *chef*.” Quite the contrary. This treasure trove of old familiar—tuna noodle casserole, shrimp Creole, cheese strata, Johnny Marzetti, Chicken Divan, frozen chopped spinach casserole[†]—summons up the image of a cozy kitchen with steamed windows, the clatter of the table being set, and the soothing aroma of a family favorite emerging hot and bubbling from the oven.

One of the genuine pleasures of *CRAZY ABOUT CASSEROLES* is the impression it gives that all Villas had to do was appear at a neighbor’s back door around dinnertime to glean another choice recipe for his collection. Think what you might of casseroles, it’s hard to imagine any other aspect of our national cooking that would reward the compiler with such rich helpings from family and friends: Three-Soup Chicken and Almond Casserole Scarborough, Lizzie’s Low Country Chicken Bog, Hootie’s Hot Seafood Shroup, Flossie’s Butternut Squash Orange Bake, and Shrimp Royal (“Royal” rather than “Royale,” Villas explains, because the first is,

^{*}Harvard Common Press, 2003. My quote appears on the back jacket of the hardcover edition but not on the paperback one.

[†]The only truly surprising absence—and it may be, *must* be, in there somewhere—is Green Bean Bake, made with a can of cream of mushroom soup, a dash of soy sauce, milk, and a can of Durkee’s French-fried onions. I remember practically swooning when I first tasted this at a supper party back in 1969.

in fact, his sister's married name).

The term "casserole," of course, embraces a wide range of American dishes, some of them very old indeed, and many of them containing nothing at which any cook, however fussy, need turn up their nose. Villas includes plenty of these in *CRAZY FOR CASSEROLES*, but they do not lie at the heart of this book, and they are not the dishes that prompted fellow blurber Jeremiah Tower to paraphrase St. Augustine—"God grant me strength to be chaste, just not yet." This statement, and others like it, signals to the casserole aficionado that Villas is not one to flinch when called on to dive straight into the deep end of the pool.

"If I had to pinpoint the one casserole," he writes, "that the women in my Southern family—mother, sister, aunt, or niece—prepare at least once a month for all sorts of informal occasions, it would have to be Poppy Seed Chicken..." which, if you don't know the dish, is made with chicken meat, a can of Campbell's condensed cream of chicken soup, a cup of sour cream, a stick of butter or margarine, and half a pound of Ritz crackers.

This doesn't mean that Villas believes that, when it comes to such dishes, anything goes. Far from it:

To maintain the distinctive character of the American casserole, I by no means have any objections to the use of such traditional components as leftover cooked foods, canned broths, soups, and tomatoes, packaged bread stuffings, certain frozen vegetables, plain dried noodles, pimentos, and supermarket natural aged cheeses. On the other hand, nowhere in this book will you find canned meats and vegetables, frozen chives or dried parsley flakes, processed cheeses, liquid smoke, MSG, bouillon cubes, crushed potato chips, or, heaven forbid, canned fruit cocktail.

Unfortunately, such distinctions don't survive long under serious scrutiny—as is usually the case when one attempts to keep a foot planted firmly in each of two warring camps. In this instance, one camp is our unselfconscious vernacular cooks, who simply don't bother to make such distinctions at all; the other is the small minority of cooks who wouldn't be caught dead making *anything* with three different kinds of canned soup. Villas is gamely proposing that there is a happy middle ground between the boobs and the snobs, a place where reasonable folks—him, you, me—can stand tall.

It's a nice enough sentiment, sure, but it seems to me to lure the reader out onto awfully thin ice. It's like saying that beanbag furniture and lava lamps are okay, but not, heaven forbid, plaster gnomes and fake pine panelling. For example, the recipes in *CRAZY FOR CASSEROLES* seem to call for enough Parmesan to absorb every ounce produced in Emil-

ia-Romagna, at least until you decode that interesting phrase “supermarket natural aged cheeses.” As it happens, a diligent searcher can find jars of dry pre-grated Parmesan that declare themselves “all natural” and aged for any number of months. If *these* are okay, why not processed American cheese?

Similarly, if packaged stuffings are in, why diss crushed potato chips? Those, after all, are made strictly from potatoes, oil, and salt, whereas the former usually sport an ingredient list that requires an advanced degree in food processing chemistry to decipher. And what’s wrong with frozen chives if you’re happily throwing frozen spinach into every casserole in sight? There are distinctions to be made here, to be sure, but this is not the way to do it.



Today the word **casserole** is applied to any deepish pot in which cooking actually goes on, or even to pots more rightly called **sauteuses** or **deep skillets**.

—Irma Rombauer, *THE JOY OF COOKING* (1951)

THOSE WHO BROWSE OLD COOKBOOKS will be aware that the casserole as we Americans know and love it is a recent creation, and one that only vaguely resembles the European dishes that were devised to make the most of what was originally a fragile clay cooking dish. Indeed, as Russ Parsons perceptively observed in a piece on casseroles that appeared several years ago in the *Los Angeles Times*, American manufacturers have so radically “improved”—i.e., changed the composition and qualities of—the cooking dish itself that it, too, has little connection with the Old World original.

What Villas has in mind by the phrase “all-American hot-dish classics” is, as best as I can work out, the product of two distinct moments in the history of our national cooking. The first was the craze for chafing dishes that swept the country in the early 1900s, when it became fashionable to invite guests home for a light late-night meal after an evening at the theater, to be made by the hostess herself at tableside, the servants, of course, having long ago gone to bed.* (Tableside cooking as a mode of casual entertaining replayed itself in the fifties with the arrival of the electric skillet—although the dishes prepared with that were not nearly as fine... remember sukiyaki parties?)

*If there were any servants to speak of. One of the unspoken advantages of the chafing dish was that it allowed young couples to entertain with style but without the trappings and expense of formal dinner parties.

Of course, what the chafing dish did was put the finishing touches on a dish that was prepped and often partially cooked earlier in the day. The following recipe—which appears in an extremely short (four-page) chapter called “With the Casserole” in MARION HARLAND’S COMPLETE COOK BOOK (1903)—exhibits just how.

CREAMED CHICKEN & MACARONI

Cut cold boiled or roast chicken into small dice of uniform size, and into half-inch lengths half the quantity of cold, cooked macaroni. Make a good white sauce, season highly with paprika, salt and a suspicion of onion juice. Beat two eggs light and stir into them four tablespoonfuls of cream, heated, with a pinch of soda. Mix well with the chicken and spaghetti; put over the fire in a frying-pan, or broad saucepan, and stir and toss until smoking hot. Serve in a deep dish.

Notice that, unless you count the serving dish, there is no “casserole” in use here at all. However, if Harland’s final step had been to combine the sauce, chicken, and spaghetti in an ovenproof dish and put that into a moderate oven until “smoking hot,” you would have something amazingly anticipatory of tuna casserole. (Canned tuna was still an imported novelty at the time, but food writers were even then noting how closely it resembled chicken.)

What is important here, however, is that Harland has set the scene for the appearance of our American casserole by completely disregarding any thought that the cooking vessel itself might have something to impart to the dish. Instead, it is the idea of the entrée and main starch of the meal melded in a creamy sauce and brought to table in a single serving dish that becomes the casserole: a simplification that still manages to retain the genteel suggestion of sauceboat and serving platter.

This sense of amalgamation—as opposed to the simpler, cooked-together oneness of, say, a beef stew—is a defining quality of this kind of casserole, and it is shared by the many dishes from that era that are made to this day (and, in fact, can be found in CRAZY FOR CASSE-ROLES). These include Turkey Tetrazzini (1912), Shrimps de Jonghe (1900), Lobster Newburg (1895), and Chicken Divan (circa 1900).

Many of these also share something else: a pleasant confusion between the richness of the ingredients—eggs, butter, cream—and of those who first ate them. These dishes were often given names that implied an association with the rich and famous—or at least with the places where those people ate—which put that fare on the same footing, almost, as a

rib roast. And, to an impartial palate, they merited that equal billing. For example, Shrimps de Jonghe (the name of a Dutch family who made this the signature dish of their Chicago hotel restaurant in the early 1900s) deservedly appears in Junior League spiral-bounds to this day. It is easily made and quite delicious.

SHRIMPS DE JONGHE

[SERVES UP TO 4 AS A MAIN COURSE, 6 OR MORE AS AN APPETIZER]

2 pounds shrimp, cleaned, cooked, and peeled

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter • 1 clove garlic, minced

1/2 cup bread crumbs • 1/4 cup finely chopped fresh parsley

1/4 cup dry sherry • salt and black pepper to taste

a dash of hot pepper sauce

•Preheat oven to 400°F. Cream together the butter and the minced clove of garlic. Blend in the bread crumbs and parsley and moisten the mixture with the sherry. Season to taste with salt, a grinding of black pepper, and a dash of hot pepper sauce, blending this in well. Spread the shrimp in a shallow baking dish and dot with the butter mixture. Bake for 25 minutes and serve hot.

*COOK'S NOTE: There has been much fiddling with this recipe over the years. Perhaps the best notion I've come across is to add some chopped onion and celery tops, peppercorns, a bay leaf, and a large pinch of salt to the water the shrimp are boiled in, to pep up their flavor.

Jean Anderson, in her *AMERICAN CENTURY COOKBOOK*—one of the best books there is on the unfolding of our contemporary vernacular cooking during the last century—points to a 1916 Campbell's booklet, *Helps for the Hostess*, as the moment when that company first put forth its products as the easy alternative to “long-winded sauces,” thus launching the classic American casserole. This is true enough—except that while Campbell's may have had the idea, they lacked, and would lack for some time, the right soup to bring it to fruition.

In *Helps for the Hostess*, cooks were instructed to thicken their soup of choice with a roux of flour and butter, thus plunging them back into the very long-windedness they were supposedly escaping. In fact, none of the Campbell's soups of that era—oxtail, mock turtle,

tomato-okra, Mulligatawny, chicken gumbo—had the starch-thickened base necessary to become an instant sauce.

It took the company almost thirty years to follow its own idea to its logical end and introduce the first in a line of thickened soups that would be used primarily as sauces: cream of mushroom soup, in 1934. Cream of chicken soup didn't appear until 1947, over a decade later. And that was the one that *really* lit the fire—Campbell's wouldn't introduce a soup that met with such instant success until the launch of cream of broccoli in 1990.

Today, their bestsellers are, in order of preference, chicken noodle, cream of mushroom, tomato, cream of chicken, and cream of broccoli, with purchasers using *one of every three cans* as a recipe ingredient; with cream of mushroom soup, that figure jumps to eighty percent. (In my opinion, this last is a *very* conservative estimate. Eaten straight...well, if your taste in soup runs to mushroom-flavored pancake batter, it can't be beat.)

Even so, it is hard to credit corporate machinations for the adoption of convenience foods as a casserole mainstay, when the evidence can just as easily point in the opposite direction—not only Campbell's own painfully slow stumbling toward the light but the decades that Bird's Eye Frosted Foods had to wait after introducing frozen spinach in the 1930s before anyone noticed how terrific the nasty stuff was in Green Rice Casserole, No-Nonsense Spinach Casserole, and shrimp Florentine.



At one time a badge of shame, hallmark of the lazy lady and the careless wife, today the can opener is fast becoming a magic wand....We want you to believe just as we do that in this miraculous age it is quite possible—and it's fun—to be a “chef” even before you can really cook. —Poppy Cannon, *THE CAN-OPENER COOKBOOK* (1951)

THIS SHIFT IN ATTITUDE toward convenience foods, rendering them an accepted, even welcomed, component of American home cooking is the second of the two defining moments in the creation of today's casserole. First it became an amalgamation of rich ingredients; now it was streamlined—some might say dumbed down—through the use of canned soups and their like.

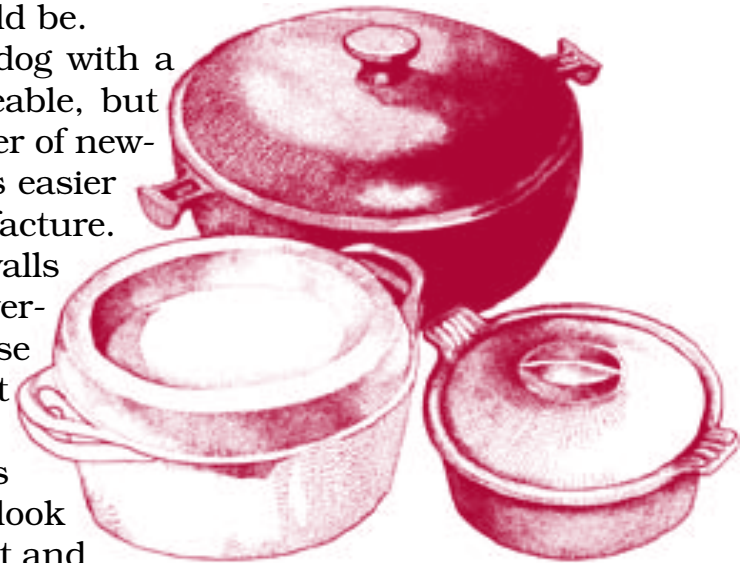
The compelling question, of course, is *why* kitchen-proud homemakers so quickly and radically revised their perception of these foods. One possible answer would begin by noting that the rise in popularity in these dishes coincided with an unprecedented surge in home own-

ership. Housing developments began springing up all around the country in the fifties—an astonishing twenty-five percent of *all* American homes in 1960 had been built within the span of the last ten years.

As it happens, my parents were a part of this. In 1957, they bought our first house, a three-bedroom garrison in a small development. (A garrison had a second floor that protruded a few inches in the front to give it a “colonial” look.) It was the newest house I had ever been in, which made it exciting, but it wasn’t an excitement that would last. My grandparents’ home, which was not all that far away and in which I had spent the first five years of my life, was an extremely complex organism—wheezing, stubborn, and surprisingly delicate. The electric wiring dated back half a century; fuses blew at a sneeze. The steam heat rumbled up from a massive furnace in the basement to hiss at you from cast-iron, claw-footed radiators. In the fall, heavy glass storm windows went up; in the spring, these were replaced with freshly painted wooden screens. It was a house that today would be considered a homeowner’s nightmare, but my grandfather took all this in his stride. For a child, it was a place of endless mystery and delight—much of this conveyed in my book *HOME BODY*—and, fifty-five years later, it remains for me the template of what a home should be.

The new house...well, it was like replacing a friendly old dog with a stuffed toy one—comfortable, unthreatening, endlessly embraceable, but really, nothing at all like the original. This was not merely a matter of newness. The same construction techniques that made these houses easier to afford also meant that more corners could be cut in their manufacture. Ceilings in the new house were lower; windows had shrunk; walls and doors were hollow, where before they had been solid. The overall experience was one of compression. You couldn’t call the house cramped, exactly, but it was full of space that never quite made it to spaciousness.

The builders were well aware of this. They took those things and sold them as advantages. Home buyers, it proved, would overlook the fact that a house was cheaply built if it was also cheap to heat and cheap to maintain. In my grandfather’s time, a house required continuous care, and owning one meant mastering all sorts of knowledge and performing a never-ending round of upkeep, both indoors and out (or paying someone else to do these things for you).



The houses of the fifties and afterward demanded no such commitment. Curiously, the result was something you might call responsibility deprivation. Here were houses that asked for so little care in a culture still primed with an ethos of devoting time and money to keeping them up. Home owners felt vaguely immoral doing nothing—and, with nothing much to do, threw themselves into home improvement to fill the void.

At first glance, it might seem that there was as little to improve as there was to fix. All the houses in our development came with a garage, a breezeway, and a fully equipped kitchen, with turquoise-colored appliances and, something quite à la mode, a dishwasher and a waist-high oven built into the wall. In fact, there are so many things to like about the place that it would be hard to enumerate them all—from the shiny wood floors to the clean, tight basement with its convenient bulkhead doors. What more could anyone want?

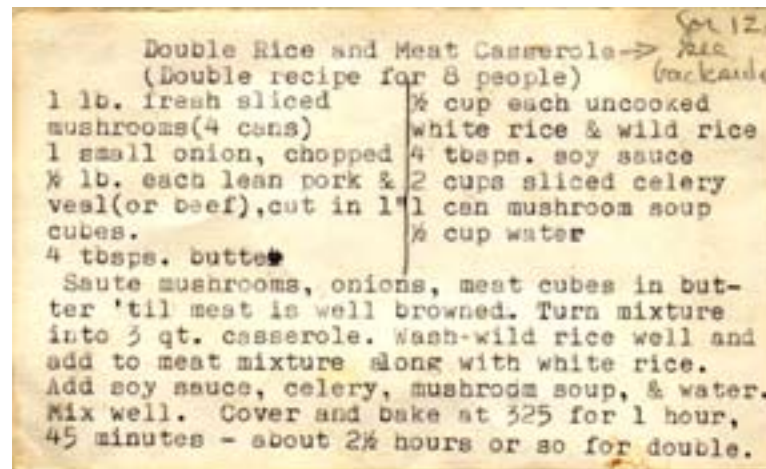
Well, as it turns out, lots of things. The breezeway quickly reveals itself as being a bit too breezy; after a year or two, it gets turned into a sunroom. Fiberglass insulation is unrolled in the attic; an exhaust fan is installed in the kitchen; a large downstairs closet becomes a very small guest bathroom. Half the basement is upgraded into a cheery family room, turning the living room into a showcase for company. Garages get expanded; backyards get swimming pools and privacy fences; front yards get flower gardens and RVs.

This new definition of house proud, I think, helps us make sense of the sea change that made respectable the recipes that CRAZY FOR CASSEROLES celebrates. Like the home owner, the home cook needed no longer shoulder a wearying responsibility—in this instance, the one incurred by dishes made from scratch. Like tract houses, dishes incorporating convenience foods—canned soups, crackers, frozen vegetables—as their foundation were affordable, easy to maintain (they always turned out well) and, with a handful of almonds or water chestnuts tossed in, easily made fancy.

Today, all this is taken for granted. Fifty years is quite long enough for a way of cooking to become a tradition and for the dishes that come out of it to be considered classics. The fact that these even now still manage to teeter at the edge of questionable taste testifies as much to their power of attraction as to the lowering of our standards (“Campbell’s soups have done more to debase the cooking of Americans—and their palates—than any other factor,” said an unnamed source quoted approvingly by John and Karen Hess in *THE TASTE OF AMERICA* twenty-five years ago).

In truth, we’re not talking about good taste and bad taste here; we’re talking about the

fact that things change and that we change with them, whether we are aware of it or not. That makes the issue of goodness a very slippery one, and it's a mistake to trust anything like a quick response to it. Reading an early draft of this essay, Matt recalled a favorite dinner party casserole of her mother's. Shirley herself had gotten it from Jean, a savvy but down-to-earth professor's wife, and it proved so popular that whenever Shirley served it, she, too, was besieged by requests for the recipe.



JEAN'S TWO MEAT TWO RICE CASEROLE

[SERVES 8]

6 tablespoons butter

1 pound EACH lean pork and veal, cut into 1-inch cubes

2 onions, chopped • 1 1/2 to 2 pounds mushrooms, sliced

2 cans cream of mushroom soup • 1 soup can water

1/3 cup soy sauce • 4 cups sliced celery

1 cup EACH uncooked white rice and wild rice

- Preheat oven to 325°F. Melt half the butter in a large skillet and sauté the meat cubes over medium heat until browned on all sides. Turn these into a large casserole. Add the remaining butter to the skillet and sauté the onions and mushrooms until both have just

started to brown. Blend the soup, water, and soy sauce together until smooth. Wash the rices in two changes of water and add to the meat with the celery and the soup mixture. Stir well. Cover and bake for 2 hours. Serve with a tossed salad and garlic bread.

For the late fifties, the presence of the wild rice, the two kinds of meat, the quantity of fresh mushrooms,* the soy sauce, all gave the casserole an air of sophistication. At the same time, the can of cream of mushroom soup immediately assured the hostess that she could approach the recipe without fear. Similarly, it signaled to the other women at the table that this was not the sort of competitive cooking meant to put them on their mettle. Their enjoyment eating it could only be enhanced by the appreciative awareness that, once given the recipe, any one of them could make it just as well...which, of course, is exactly why so many asked for it.

In other words, the pleasures inherent in this kind of cooking are essentially, emphatically, *social*. One need only compare the open-handed communality of the cooks in *CRAZY FOR CASSEROLES* with, say, Madame X in *THE COOKING OF SOUTH-WEST FRANCE*, who agreed to teach Paula Wolfert about the local cuisine while refusing—through distraction and, if that failed, outright deception—to reveal any of her hard-won cooking secrets. Madame X's cabbage and dumpling soup may or may not taste better than Jean's casserole, but the reason one was not shared while the other was—over and over again—not had nothing to do with goodness. One of the unalloyed benefits of the nonthreatening, noncompetitive nature of convenience-food cookery is that it radiates a contagious sense of companionship and good cheer.

It was this, I realize now, that captivated me when I first leafed through *CRAZY FOR CASSEROLES*. I had been completely absorbed by the image of other people happily making and eating this food—something very different from thinking I might want to make it myself. This isn't to say that I wouldn't gladly gorm it down as a dinner guest, which has happened more than once—remember my response to green bean casserole. I might even, in that flush of pleasure, ask, like all the others, for the recipe. But, in the end, I would never use it. These dishes are not what makes me want to cook.

* In our vernacular cooking, mushrooms are almost always seen as an enhancement to a dish rather than as a basic component the way, say, carrots or celery are. This isn't because mushrooms are expensive but because enough people regard them with suspicion for them to be deemed an acquired—and, to that extent, an *enlightened*—taste.



Casserole: a porous dish of clay or earthenware, much used in French cooking. The heat penetrates it slowly and all the juices and flavors of the meats, etc., are retained.

—Artemas Ward, *THE GROCER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA* (1911)

ARTEMAS WARD'S DESCRIPTION REMINDS ME—perhaps it is that word “porous”—of my grandfather's house. Maybe it is just that, having used such casseroles, I know that they are an example of form determining function: too fragile to handle high heat on top of the stove or within it, they *require* the low, sustained heat that, it turns out, retains the juices and flavor of the dish. An old house likewise demands an alertness that shapes our experience of it and, for good or ill, our personality. This can, at times, be annoying, but its reality is such that its absence can make another, newer house feel strangely empty, even sterile.

This must be how I feel about the now ubiquitous, nonporous, high-heat-fired Corningware casserole dishes—which can be (some of them, anyway) used on top of the stove as well as in it, and which can take as hot an oven as you care to put them in—because I don't own any... whereas we have several of the old-fashioned clay kind. What these lack in cold perfection they make up for in *resonance*—if I can use that word to convey how an inanimate object can compel your attention and reward it with accretions of experience.

This same term can be usefully applied to a certain sort of recipe as well. Jean's casserole called to mind *baeckeoffe*, a traditional casserole from Alsace, which might not be considered a dinner party dish on its native turf, but could certainly fill that role here. Made with three kinds of meat, marinated and then baked in wine, and brought to table in the cooking vessel, where its seal of flour paste is broken to release a cloud of delicious aromas, it has all the necessary class, enhanced with a touch of drama. It is also rather easy to make.

BAECKEOFFE

[SERVES 8]

1 pound EACH boneless stewing pork, shoulder of

lamb, and stewing beef

2 pig's feet, split in half (optional—see note)

marinade

1 tablespoon salt • 1/2 tablespoon black peppercorns

1 sprig fresh OR 1 teaspoon dried thyme

2 bay leaves • 2 or 3 garlic cloves, minced

1 or 2 sprigs fresh celery leaves, chopped

several sprigs fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped

1/2 bottle dry white wine (preferably an Alsatian Riesling)

casserole

butter or lard for greasing

3 pounds waxy potatoes, peeled and sliced

2 onions, chopped • 2 leeks, trimmed and sliced

4 carrots, peeled and cut into bite-size pieces

luting (sealing) paste

1 scant cup flour • 5 tablespoons water

1 tablespoon cooking oil

The day before:

- Cut the meat into bite-size pieces and put them in a large nonreactive container with the pig's feet. Toss with the salt, pepper, herbs, garlic, celery leaves, and parsley. Moisten with the wine. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Assembling and cooking:

- Preheat oven to 400°F. Select a large ovenproof casserole with a lid. Grease the bottom and sides with the butter or lard. Lay the pig's feet on the bottom and cover with half the potatoes, onions, leeks, and carrots. Remove the meat from the marinade and add, covering it with the remaining vegetables, ending with the potatoes. Strain the marinade through



a sieve and pour the liquid over the contents of the pot. If necessary, add some extra wine or water to bring the liquid barely to the top of the vegetables.

- Work the sealing paste ingredients into a dough and roll this out into a rope long enough to wrap around the casserole. Press it firmly against the join between the lid and the casserole. Put the sealed pot into the oven and cook for 1 hour. At this point, reduce the heat to 350°F and continue cooking for 1½ hours more.

- For the most dramatic presentation, bring the casserole to the table, set it on a trivet, and break away the seal with the edge of a table knife. Otherwise, of course, this can be done in the kitchen and servings of the *baeckeoffe* brought to table in shallow bowls. Serve with a green salad, a loaf of crusty bread, and some of the same wine used for making the marinade.

☛ **COOK'S NOTE:** **The pig's feet** provide a gelatinous cast to the *baeckeoffe*'s juices. Oxtail is another traditional option, as is nothing at all. **The luting paste** is meant as much to keep the wine's vaporous aromas from escaping as it is to keep the cooking liquid from evaporating. A band of heavy aluminum foil will work almost as well.

Readers may smile at my describing this dish as easy to make, especially in contrast to Jean's casserole, with its single short paragraph of instruction. And they are probably right to do so, even though in Alsace *baeckeoffe* is considered the next step up from convenience food. The name means "baker's oven," and the dish is traditionally made on Mondays, the casserole being dropped off in the morning at the local bakery, to slowly cook in a corner of the bread oven while the housewife concentrates on getting the laundry done. This means that the prep work is all done early on and that no special bother need be spared to make it.

What it does require—and this goes a long way toward explaining the difference in recipe length—is that the cook take responsibility for the dish. The recipe only points the way. It has been shaped by many, many years of spirited input from a countless number of Alsatian cooks. They disagree about the kinds (and cuts) of meat—Le Baeckeoffe d'Alsace, a Strasbourg restaurant, offers several variations, including one made with duck, another

*Anyone wanting to push the envelope further still should turn to *SAVEUR COOKS AUTHENTIC FRENCH* (Chronicle, 1999), which gives a recipe for Baeckeoffe de Foie Gras, a creation of Émile Jung of the three-star Au Crocodile, also in Strasbourg, with its lobe of fresh duck foie gras and black truffle.

with ox cheeks and calves' feet. Some add carrots to the marinade; others, cloves.* Some insist that a tablespoon of red wine vinegar pulls the flavors of the dish together; most don't mention it. An Alsatian Riesling is the wine most often used in the dish, but recipes can be found calling for Gewürtztraminer, Sylvaner, or Pinot Blanc (or even Alsatian beer). Some cooks use shallots instead of onions (small ones, peeled but left whole); others use only leeks. The addition of other vegetables apart from the leeks and potatoes is a matter of taste; some add none but most add something— carrots, celeriac, tiny turnips.

Over the years, Anne Willan has given us at least three recipes for *baeckeoffe*, in FRENCH REGIONAL COOKING (1981), LA FRANCE GASTRONOMIQUE (1991), and CHÂTEAU CUISINE (1992), each quarreling amicably with the others. Interestingly, the last recipe of the three is by far the simplest, as if suggesting that time eventually pares things down to the essentials: the meat, the potatoes, the wine, the onions, the garlic, the bouquet garni.

If you make the dish, you will ponder on these things yourself. In fact, if you make it more than once, that may well be because you want to resolve some questions that came up the first time around. Those who ate it might have found it simply delicious, but *you* want to know if it would taste better if you sautéed the leeks in a little lard or butter before adding them to the casserole; whether veal might go better with pork and lamb than stewing beef.

Such issues and their resolution continually sharpen its focus. Keep at it and the dish will eventually attain the melodic tautness of a well-tuned guitar. It will ring true, and that, to a cook, is an astonishingly satisfying thing. This explains why we collect so many recipes but end up making, over and over, the same familiar dishes. The other night, listening to the Be Good Tanyas (BLUE HORSE: Nettwerk America, 2001) singing “Oh Susanna,” I thought how hard it was to wear out a good tune. You just keep making it new. Surely the same is true with recipes, dishes; it's why I like so much to cook.



Being lazy and liking to cook and to entertain, we struggled futilely for a long time over how to combine these features pleasantly. Finally the thing came to us—that thing being a casserole. Stews and other wrongly demeaned dishes take on a dash of simplicity and sophistication when prepared in a casserole.

—Marian Tracy, CASSEROLE COOKERY (1942)

SINCE THERE COULD BE no better characterization of me than as a lazy person in love with cooking, perhaps the reason that Marian Tracy and other casserole makers go one way and I the other can be found in the word “entertaining.” This is something I rarely do—I’d much rather get together with friends and family at a restaurant, where we can all walk away from the dirty dishes together. I do understand, though, that entertaining must make a lot of people nervous, there being so many, many reassuring books on the subject.

Even so, earlier in my life I was innocent enough to often have people over, in couples and in groups, and it never occurred to me that they might turn up their noses at a good Irish stew (let alone *baeckeoffe*, had I known about it then). Nor have I ever read a food writer who argued to the contrary. Where then does the fear that such things are “not good enough for company”—or, more to the point, that guests might secretly sneer at their hostess for serving them—come from? Or, to put it another way, was Marian Tracy—who would go on to publish at least two further books on convenience-food-based casserole cookery (Poppy Cannon was no slouch in that department either)—reading the mind of her public or planting in that mind a germinating seed of doubt?

Just as the invention of the personal deodorant transformed body odor, until then a mere fact of life, into a universal embarrassment, so could casserole cookery, which impressed cooks with its unthreatening easiness, make the uncertain work of preparing something pleasing from scratch seem rife with potential discomfiture.

Convenience food cookery frees the cook of responsibility for the dish, and freedom from responsibility is such a delicious experience that it becomes part of the deliciousness of the dish itself—just as it is part of the deliciousness of living in a tract house. The vinyl siding doesn’t so much fool the eye as persuade it that what it sees is surely good enough if this means never having to scrape and paint the outside of a house again.

A bargain with the devil, yes, albeit one that’s easy enough to ignore. (That’s what’s so nice about deals struck with Old Scratch.) But, nonetheless...it used to be that old houses, like old people, aged into increasingly fragile, complex collations of successes, failures, and compromises—which is to say surviving the consequences of what seemed like good ideas at the time. Today’s houses, locked in a lackluster permanence, gather no such patina. The passage of time merely makes them increasingly boring.

And so it is with tuna noodle or poppy seed chicken or Jean’s casserole. They will never again be as good as the first time you tasted them, however slowly the experience rolls

downhill. In fact, Shirley can't remember the last time she made that casserole; she was as astonished as we were to find the recipe card, stained and brown with age, still in her file. When Matt first entertained, she served it to company herself. But the recipe card brought back less a rush of nostalgia than one of surprise. She remembered the casserole as being distinctly cosmopolitan for its time, which may indeed be true. Her astonishment, though, came from the fact that two key ingredients—the can of condensed soup, the slug of soy sauce—had completely vanished from her memory. As soon as she saw them, the recipe lost its sheen...and any interest she might have had in making it again.

We get tired, too, of dishes that demand more from us than to be just thrown together. But, most always, that says something more about us than about them. We've made them too often; we and they both need a rest. But if we return to them, even decades later, they often can spring instantly back to life. They need to be freshly tuned, it's true—the amount of olive oil cut back; the garlic actually added to the dish, not merely rubbed around the inside of the pot. They won't taste the same as they did back then, but, with luck, they'll taste just as good. They might even taste better—after all, you have learned a few things since, some tricks that, it turns out, this old dish is eager to learn. That, after all, is what keeps it—and us—feeling young. ♦

Hanging Out at the No-Name

A Diner Story with Recipes



The Story So Far: On a run-down part of Water Street sits a tiny, brightly painted, nameless diner. Alec, our narrator, who owns a used-book store in the row of Victorian commercial buildings that loom beside it, has gradually become a regular, getting to know the Professor—the burly, bearded proprietor and grill cook—and Greg—the Gen-X waitron-busboy-dishwasher. The last episode concluded with Greg uttering, as he exited Alec’s book shop, the mysterious line “See ya at UT2K3.”

“**U**nreal Tournament 2003,” Jo explained, when I told her about my day. “Online carnage. So,” she went on thoughtfully, “he calls himself ‘nmaddoG’? You know, I do think I’ve kicked his butt.”

“You’ve *played* this game?” I asked, astonished.

“Sure. Usually on my laptop at faculty meetings, sometimes between classes—just to keep the blood flowing through my brain. In fact, I consider myself one of the ‘1337.’”

I looked at her blankly.

“Game slang,” she explained patiently. “Created expressly to exclude newbies like yourself. 1=L, 3=E, 7=T, makes LEET, aka ELITE. Get it?”

I shook my head, meaning not that I failed to get it but that this was revealing a side of my wife that I didn’t even know existed. Exchanging laser blasts with Greg at some Internet free-for-all? “What name do *you* go by at these events?” I asked.

“I think you’ll be happier not knowing the answer to that one,” she said sweetly.

I sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I’ve had too many shocks today already, although the thought that I’ve agreed to make supper for the Professor is in a class by itself. What could I *possibly* make? Or, to put it another way, what could *I* possibly make?”

Jo looked at me seriously. “That’s a no-brainer,” she said. “You don’t cook. You’ve

never cooked. But there is one thing you make that fooled me into thinking that you *could* cook when we first met. Unfortunately, we got married before I found out how wrong I was. It should deceive the Professor just as easily. The only trick would be not getting yourself into a fix that required that you make supper for him a second time. When it comes to meal-making, you're strictly a one-trick pony."

"That stung," I said. "You forget I'm a master at the outdoor grill."

"That did slip my mind," she admitted. "Your chicken flambé is famous throughout the neighborhood."

We both laughed. A marinade I had devised featuring Gilbey's gin had had unexpected consequences that concluded with the arrival of the fire department.

"Anyway," I said, "I think you might be right. It's my only contribution to the culinary canon, and so far the only one who's ever tasted it has been you."

"And the uncounted—and never yet named—number of women who preceded me," Jo added.

"Listen," I said, "if you can keep your online moniker to yourself, I can keep secret the members of my tasting panel. It's enough to know that when I achieved perfection, perfection was my reward."

"Can't argue with that one," Jo said, putting her arm around me and giving me a squeeze. "Now go exercise your culinary skills and feed the dog."



THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON I was sitting at the counter of the No-Name downing a bowl of American chop suey, while the Professor companionably fried up a big batch of onions on the grill for the following day's special, which I guessed to be his oven-baked beef and onion stew. As I dug into the meaty, cheesy, noodle-y mess before me, my mind wandered back to the conversation of the night before.

Jo and I had met when we both worked at the software company that produced Over-Write, at the time a well-regarded word-processing program. I was part of the tiny team writing the manual while she was employed as a program debugger. This meant that I spent my days struggling to translate impenetrable jargon and arcane commands into reasonably clear English and she spent hers scouring endless lines of output for tiny nits.

So while I was fuming at the programmers for their rigidly unyielding mindset, she was abusing them for their slaphappy code writing. This left the two of us—for entirely opposite reasons—cynical outcasts among the lotus eaters, and we ended up regularly sharing a table at the company cafeteria, saucing the pallid stuff on our plates with sardonic derision of our fellow eaters.

One of my chief complaints about the programming department—apart from its shameless awe at its own efforts—was its refusal to let me list in the manual things that OverWrite *wouldn't* do that a user might naively—or even quite properly—think it *ought* to do. For example, to insert words or phrases in the space above or below a line of text, something easily achieved with a typewriter—or a pen on a typewritten page.

These lapses were the case with many other programs, too, and eventually I gathered enough examples to write a book on the subject—NOBODY TOLD ME: THINGS POPULAR COMPUTER PROGRAMS OUGHT TO DO BUT CAN'T, DON'T, OR JUST PLAIN WON'T (IDG, 1996). It was just successful enough to (a) get me fired and (b) earn the amount of money I needed to get started in the used book trade. It also (c) gave me the nerve to propose to Jo. We had spent many evenings working on the manuscript together, arguing furiously over my supposed stylistic quirks and lapses into irrationality. Getting married was the obvious next step.

Used as we both were to lives fueled by Chinese take-out and anchovy pizza (a shared taste so unexpected that when Jo first tentatively confessed to it, I almost popped the question then and there), we failed to notice that neither of us had the faintest clue as to what a kitchen was for—except as the place where you kept juice cold and heated leftover take-out for breakfast.

We were still not sure how things might progress beyond that point. Occasionally, one or the other of us would bring home some kitchen gadget, which would be installed, admired, and then instantly abandoned. This was the case with cookbooks, too. These would seem helpful enough in the bookstore—often my own—but when brought home universally failed to light any fires.

Watching the Professor ride herd on his frying onions, I wondered if cooking weren't something like dancing—you needed a certain sense of rhythm to even understand what it was all about.

The Professor came over and took my empty bowl, placing it in a dish tub under the counter. “Penny for your thoughts,” he said. “The noise of your brain turning over was drown-

ing out the sizzle on the grill.”

“Cooking,” I said. “I was working up my nerve to ask you over for dinner.”

The Professor looked at me in surprise. “Prepared by *you*?” he asked.

“None other,” I admitted, adding somewhat lamely, “well, kind of.”

“*That* certainly whets a guest’s appetite,” the Professor snorted. “Still,” he said, “I’m happy to accept. You won’t mind if I bring someone with me?”

It was my turn to be surprised. “Not at all,” I stammered. My mind reeled. Girlfriend? *Wife*? When it came right down to it, how little I knew about the man.

As if he were reading my thoughts, the Professor smiled. “Jessie,” he said. “You remember—my daughter.”

TO BE CONTINUED

NO-NAME AMERICAN CHOP SUEY

The Professor says: “This is a dish that I inherited from Woody, the diner’s previous owner, that regulars refused to let me take off the menu. (Texas hash is another.) You’ll find American chop suey in old-time blue-collar eating places all over New England even today, and the dish dates back at least to the thirties. The name, as far as I can make out, is a kind of joke. But it was a joke by someone who had tasted the original—you can tell that by the way the celery is cut into Chinese-style slivers. Of course, there’s the soy sauce, too...what there is of it. The old recipes call for half a teaspoon! The earliest one I’ve found, in a vintage Fannie Farmer, calls the stuff ‘chop suey sauce,’ as, I guess, it is.”

[SERVES 4 TO 6]

8 ounces elbow macaroni • 2 tablespoons peanut oil

1 large onion, finely chopped • 1 garlic clove, minced

1 or 2 stalks celery • 1 pound lean ground beef

1 14.5-ounce can diced tomatoes

4 ounces grated Cheddar cheese

1 tablespoon soy sauce • dash of hot pepper sauce

salt and black pepper to taste

- Boil and drain the elbow macaroni. Meanwhile, heat the peanut oil in a skillet over a medium flame. Put in the onion and garlic and cook until these are tender and translucent. At the same time, cut the celery into slivers about 2 inches long. Add these to the garlic/onion mixture, followed by the beef, breaking this up well with a spatula. Cook until the meat is nicely browned. Stir in the tomatoes and, when these have heated, the grated cheese and the macaroni. When everything is hot and bubbling, stir in the soy sauce and a light dash of hot pepper sauce, then season to taste with salt and black pepper.



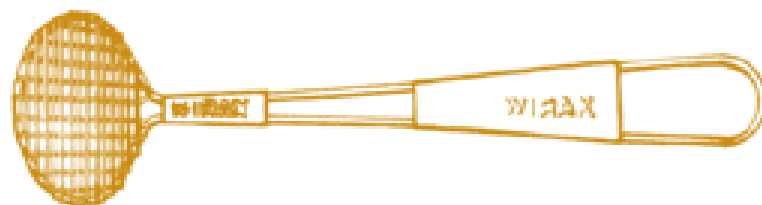
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Table Talk

NO-NAME COTTAGE PEACH COBBLER. PENNY KENT (DALLAS, TEXAS). I've been thinking about this since I read the last issue (cover to cover, as usual) last Friday. Your recipe happens to be one of our family hand-me-downs, of which there are several from my grandfather, a life-long professional and later avid home baker. Anyway, most of us grandkids can remember him giving us this recipe as soon as we were old enough to cook. He passed it on with the following alliterative summary—repeated often, as he obviously enjoyed hearing himself say it: “Put the batter in the butter and the peaches in the batter.” We all thought he had made up this brilliantly simple recipe, and I was surprised to see such an exact replica in *Simple Cooking*. We knew he was well travelled—in fact had been in all but a couple of states, as he also regularly reminded us—but we were not aware that he made it all the way from Missouri to the No-Name Diner!



MASHED POTATOES RECONSIDERED (1): SMASHERS. CATHERINE VODREY (EAST LIVERPOOL, OHIO). I confess that I have always used baked potatoes—not boiled—for smashers (as my potato-loving family affectionately calls them). I got into this habit when I had my first apartment after college and do it to this day, because then I can nibble the skins once the potatoes are done baking. Sometimes I even share with my family... after all, the skin is practically the best part! Here's how I do it. I grab a big old Hall China bowl (thick-walled, the better to hold the heat) and fill it with piping-hot water. While the bowl is heating up, I start scooping out the insides of the baked potatoes. I dump the water out of the bowl, balance the ricer (it has a groove on the underside that allows it to rest comfortably on the lip of the bowl), add some potatoes, a blob of butter and cream cheese, a splash of buttermilk or plain yogurt, and, finally, a generous sprinkle of salt and pepper and a pinch of nutmeg. I rice all this into

the hot bowl, then repeat the process until no spuds are left. Fluff everything up with a fork—and voilà, potato heaven. I serve this to great acclaim at regular old family dinners and holidays. In fact, I even tempted fate last Thanksgiving by making these a day in advance, storing them in the fridge in a lidded casserole, then baking them for about an hour in a hot oven on Thanksgiving Day. They turned out only a tiny fraction less fantastic than when I serve them immediately after making them.

MASHED POTATOES RECONSIDERED (2) GEORGIA HANSEN (SPRUCE HEAD, MAINE). First, in cooking the potatoes, I add a bay leaf to the cooking water, and although I don't use a steamer I use as little water as possible. I do peel and quarter the potatoes and lightly salt the water. When the potatoes are done—I remove the bay leaf or my husband will find it in his serving—I pour the cooking liquid into a Pyrex measuring cup and add about twice as much dry milk powder as I would to reconstitute it back into milk. For instance, if I have 1 cup of liquid, I add $\frac{2}{3}$ cup dry milk crystals. I add a fat chunk of butter to the potatoes and mash with “My Mother’s Potato Masher & Beater” (a hoe-shaped thing with slots in it—a great tool). Then I add as much of the potato milk as needed to make a nice consistency. If my proportions are right, I use all the milk (otherwise, the dog gets the rest—unless I’m about to make bread, then it goes into the dough). I add a little white pepper and salt as needed. My mother used to make riced potatoes, but even better is the recipe my aunt calls:

1-2-3-4-5 POTATOES

[SERVES 4 TO 6]

1 parsnip • 2 purple-top turnips (or $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ yellow turnip)

3 onions • 4 carrots • 5 potatoes

a bay leaf • 1 or 2 garlic cloves

butter, salt, and black pepper to taste

- Peel the vegetables and cut them into pieces. Put them all in the same pot with as little water as possible and cook until tender. Strain the vegetables, reserving the liquid. Put them through a ricer, add butter and salt and pepper to taste, working in enough of the cooking liquid to give everything the consistency of mashed potatoes. This is great with ham, pork, or old-fashioned country sausage.

Department of Random Receipts



POPPY SEED CHICKEN

“If I had to pinpoint the one casserole that the women in my Southern family—mother, sister, aunt, or niece—prepare at least once a month for all sorts of informal occasions, it would have to be Poppy Seed Chicken....” Did this statement by Jim Villas make you curious? Well, here’s the recipe, slightly modified. The Villas family recipe uses no garlic and poaches the breasts in a liquid that is then discarded, which seems to me can only further dilute the taste of what is already a rather flavorless cut of meat.

[SERVES 6 TO 8]

1 stick (4 ounces) unsalted butter • 1 clove garlic, minced

6 boneless chicken breasts, cut into bite-size pieces

One 10 3/4-ounce can condensed cream of’ chicken soup

1 cup sour cream • 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons poppy seeds, plus extra for topping

hot pepper sauce and black pepper to taste

1/2 pound (1 sleeve) Ritz crackers, crushed

- Melt 1 tablespoon of the butter in a skillet. Add the crushed garlic, and, once that turns translucent, the pieces of chicken. Cover, turn the heat down as low as possible, and cook for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, butter a 2¹/₂-quart casserole.
- Transfer the chicken and its juices to a large bowl and mix in the undiluted condensed soup, sour cream, lemon juice, and poppy seeds. Season with a dash of hot pepper sauce and several grindings of black pepper, and taste for salt in case the soup hasn’t provided enough. Transfer this to the prepared casserole and spread the crushed crackers evenly over the top. Dot with the remaining butter, sprinkle generously with the reserved poppy seeds. Bake till bubbly and browned, about 30 minutes.

BAECKEOFFE WITH MUNSTER CHEESE

While researching *baeckeffe* online, I occasionally came across this version—very unlike any other *baeckeffe* and very much in the tradition of the American casserole. In the same high-caloric spirit, it is generally offered as a side dish to roast beef or leg of lamb; I would instead suggest it as an entrée, served with a green salad on the side.

[SERVES UP TO 4 AS AN ENTRÉE, 6 OR MORE AS A SIDE DISH]

1 tablespoon unsalted butter • 4 shallots, finely diced

1/4 cup heavy cream

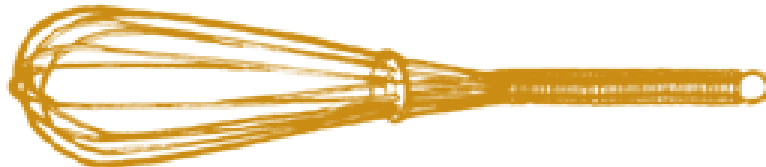
1/2 teaspoon EACH salt and black pepper

1 pound potatoes, peeled, boiled, and thinly sliced

12 ounces Alsatian Munster, sliced thin

1/2 bottle dry white wine (preferably an Alsatian Riesling)

- Preheat oven to 375°F. Melt all but a sliver of the butter in a small skillet and sauté the minced shallots until they turn translucent. Don't let them brown. Remove the skillet from the heat and gently stir in the cream, salt, and black pepper.
- Use the other bit of butter to grease the bottom and sides of a casserole. Cover the bottom with a layer of the sliced potatoes, use a spatula to spread over this a portion of the shallots and cream, then top this with the Munster. Repeat this until all the potatoes have been used, ending with a layer of Munster on top. Pour over the wine.
- Put the casserole, uncovered, in the oven and bake for 45 minutes, until everything is bubbling hot and the cheese on top has become a golden brown crust.



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