

American Chop Suey

Just because it's associated with grade school cafeterias doesn't mean the noodles must be overcooked, the meat gray, and the sauce bland. BY DIANE UNGER

ASSOCIATE American grade school cafeterias: casserole of blown-out worthless tomato sauce ground beef. I have a memory of the dish from my uncle's. A heaping chop suey—served with Parmesan cheese—pro-expensive, and satisfying extended family. But awful of unappetizing one from the food of a local school district, stand why other grown-e casserole a pass. chop suey (sometimes combines elbow macaroni, onion, bell pepper, celery, etc.). The recipes that browned ground beef on the stove. After (inevitably) simmered in water until turned gray, I was disappointed in the vegetables, a by-product, and finally the (overcooked) macaroni. Many recipes use equal amounts of macaroni and ground beef. At that point—I immediately turned off the heat. Next, to get rid of the grease that plagues many recipes, I browned lean ground beef, about 80 percent. To coax the fat out, I cooked the beef in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat until the liquid that it exuded had evaporated and the meat browned and was sizzling. I set the side and moved on to the next step: the sauce base.

An important culinary rule: don't crowd the pot. The vegetables would steam in their own liquid (translation: better flavor.) I browned the beef and bits left behind in the pot. To the meat I added onion, bell pepper, and green pepper until they were a nice light brown. I added a variety of tomato products: a combination of fresh tomatoes which I sautéed with the beef to open its flavor; canned tomatoes which easily penetrated the beef; and diced tomatoes, which were true to the homey, comforting, I kept the seasoning simple: salt, red pepper flakes, and black pepper.



To avoid mushy macaroni, we undercook the pasta, shock it in cold water, and let it finish cooking in the sauce off heat.

I had no intention of dirtying two pots (one for the pasta, the other for the sauce). More important, I'd need to avoid the cardinal sin of most chop suey recipes: bland, bloated macaroni. I tested macaroni cooked every which way and on every which timetable. Ultimately, I boiled it for just three minutes, draining it and shocking it with cold water to stop the cooking. I browned the beef and built the sauce in the same pot. After the sauce had simmered some 15 minutes, I added back the macaroni and—here's the cool part—turned off the heat and covered the pot. Ten minutes later, the residual heat had cooked the macaroni through, plus the noodles absorbed flavor from the sauce.

The pasta was perfectly cooked, the beef plentiful, the dish flavorful but not greasy. So what was missing? Parmesan! My mom confirmed that by family tradition we stirred cheese right into the pot, making a good chop suey even better.

AMERICAN CHOP SUEY

Serves 6 to 8

Our favorite elbow macaroni is made by Barilla. Hunt's Diced Tomatoes are our taste-test winner. Spice up your chop suey by serving it with hot sauce or Worcestershire sauce.

- 12 ounces (3 cups) elbow macaroni
- Salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 pounds 90 percent lean ground beef
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- 1 green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped fine
- 2 celery ribs, chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 (29-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 cup water
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (½ cup), plus extra for serving

1. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in Dutch oven. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook for 3 minutes. Drain and rinse pasta with cold water. Drain again and set aside.

2. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in now-empty Dutch oven over medium-high heat until just smoking. Add beef, 1 teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper and cook, breaking up pieces with spoon, until all liquid has evaporated and meat begins to sizzle, 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer meat to bowl.

3. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil in now-empty Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion, bell pepper, and celery and cook, covered, stirring occasionally, until vegetables soften, about 5 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring constantly, until rust-colored, about 2 minutes. Stir in garlic and red pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tomato sauce, tomatoes, water, and cooked ground beef. Bring to simmer and cook, covered, over low heat, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened, about 15 minutes.

4. Off heat, stir in reserved pasta, cover, and let sit until pasta is tender, about 10 minutes. Stir in Parmesan. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, passing additional Parmesan separately.

The American Table The Namesake

What's in a name? Lots of history: Labeling familiar foods with exotic names was a fun kind of game in the late 19th century, when much of the U.S. middle class became casually aware of Eastern culture and wanted to show off their (nominally) expanding horizons. Even after World War I, when anti-immigrant sentiment crested, dishes with quasi-foreign names (Japanese Salad, Spanish Rice) were considered cosmopolitan. This trend carried into the Depression, when the names of foreign mixed dishes—such as goulash, hodgepodge, or chop suey—were applied to varied assortments of all-American meat, vegetables, and potatoes. —CHRIS DUDLEY