

8TH ANNUAL RESTAURANT ISSUE

# BON APPÉTIT

SEPTEMBER 2001

AMERICA'S FOOD AND ENTERTAINING MAGAZINE

THE NEW  
ETHNIC  
RESTAURANT



RAFIH BENJELLOUN OF THE IMPERIAL FEZ  
IN ATLANTA WITH CORNISH GAME HENS  
WITH DRIED FRUIT AND HONEY.



PATRICIA YEO OF AZ IN NEW YORK WITH  
KABOCHA SQUASH AND CHESTNUT SOUP  
WITH CHIPOTLE CRÈME FRAÎCHE.

## DON'T HOLD THE ONIONS

*Chefs everywhere depend on them in every kind of recipe—subtle to spicy*

By Anthony Head



**C**ONSIDER THE ONION: Pungent. Tear-jerking. Indispensable. The onion is such a ubiquitous ingredient in kitchens all over the globe that no matter which nation a dish comes from, there's a good chance that the recipe begins with chopping a common yellow onion. Luckily for us, there are plenty of onions to go around.

According to Tanya Fell of the National Onion Association in Greeley, Colorado, more than a hundred billion pounds of onions are produced yearly around the world. "China is the leading grower, followed by India and the United States, where onions make up the third largest vegetable crop," she says. As a nation, we consume roughly 18 pounds of onions per person every year. (That's a lot—but the average Libyan eats a breath-defying 67 pounds per year.)

Even with dozens of varieties to choose from, the yellow onion is by far America's favorite. In fact, 88 percent of all onions grown domestically are the yellow ones. Chefs consider yellow onions fundamental because they're meaty with a high sugar content, a combination that allows for countless applications.

Raw, onions add a pungent crunch to salads, burgers and Mexican salsas. Cooked, they reveal their sweet side—as in robust Italian pasta sauces or rich French onion soup. Don't forget the onion's uses in Indian chutneys, Turkish

*mezes* or Irish loins of lamb. Without onions, a pantry—in any country—might as well be empty.

"Onions might be basic, but they're crucial to running a successful restaurant," says Jean-Robert de Cavel, chef de cuisine at Cincinnati's *Maisonette*. "They're in all our broths and stocks and so many of our soups. They're essential ingredients." De Cavel estimates that his staff uses 350 pounds of onions each week.

Yet for something so common, the onion's origins remain mysterious. We know that onions have grown wild since prehistoric times; in fact, they probably gained popularity about the time that people figured out how much easier it was to sit on a stump and wait for food to pop up out of the ground than to chase some sharp-clawed beast through the forest. This member of the lily family (cousin to garlic, leeks, chives and shallots) was simple to find (by the smell, of course), stayed fresh for weeks, and seasoned nearly every other edible thing around—even those forest-dwelling sharp-clawed beasts.

Since then, onions have been so widely cultivated that it's impossible to pinpoint the exact place where the first crop was raised. People who like to speculate on such things believe that the onion was first domesticated in the Mediterranean at least five thousand years ago. Others, like Fell, say the location is actually in central Asia. "It seems likely that the cultivated onion originated in Iran and Pakistan," she says, quickly adding, "but no one knows for sure."

One thing is clear: The onion has played a significant role in world affairs. As much as two million dollars' worth of onions, garlic and radishes was consumed by workers during the construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Alexander the Great conquered western Asia Minor on faith that onions lent his troops the valor needed to prevail. In this country, onions assisted the North in winning the Civil War: In a letter to the Department of War, soon-to-be-victorious General Ulysses S. Grant stated bluntly, "I will not move my army without onions." He promptly received three cartloads.

Still, the onion's global dominance becomes most deliciously evident when you ➤

eat in nearly any restaurant anywhere. Whether trained at Le Cordon Bleu or in the family kitchen in Bombay, chefs employ onions every day to add depth and flavor to their signature dishes.

Will we ever locate the onion's exact birthplace? Probably not. But as demonstrated by the following recipes, the glorious onion belongs to the whole world.

**ONION CHUTNEY**

**DIVA INDIAN BISTRO**

**SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS**

Use this uncooked chutney to add spicy heat to lamb or chicken.

MAKES ABOUT 5 CUPS

- 2 pounds onions, chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, chopped
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 3 tablespoons ketchup
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander

Mix all ingredients in large bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight. (Can be made 3 days ahead. Keep refrigerated.)

**SAUTÉED CALF'S LIVER SMOTHERED WITH ONIONS**

**THE BERGHOFF, CHICAGO**

Serve this dish, from chef Matthew Reichel, with potato pancakes or rice pilaf.

4 SERVINGS

- 1 cup all purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 8 ½-inch-thick slices calf's liver
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
  
- 1 tablespoon butter
- ½ cup beer
- 2 pounds onions, sliced

Combine flour, salt and pepper in medium bowl. Coat liver with seasoned flour, shaking off excess. Heat oil in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat. Sauté liver in 2 batches until cooked to desired doneness, about 1½ minutes per side for medium. Transfer liver to plate; tent with foil.

Melt butter in same skillet over medi-

um-high heat. Add beer and bring to boil, scraping up browned bits. Add onions; simmer until tender, about 15 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Divide liver among 4 plates. Top with onions.

**ONION AND BARLEY SOUP WITH SWISS CHEESE FLAN**

**MAISONETTE, CINCINNATI**

A new take on a classic French dish from chef de cuisine Jean-Robert de Cavel.

6 SERVINGS

SOUP

- 2 tablespoons (¼ stick) butter
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 cups sliced onions
- ½ cup pearl barley
- 3 tablespoons dry Sherry
- 8 cups chicken stock or canned low-salt chicken broth
- 4 fresh thyme sprigs

FLANS

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 2 cups sliced onions
- ¾ cup whipping cream
- 3 large eggs
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1¼ cups (packed) grated Swiss cheese

FOR SOUP: Melt butter with oil in heavy large pot over medium-high heat. Add onions; sauté until caramelized, about 20 minutes. Add barley and Sherry; cook 30 seconds. Add chicken stock and thyme. Bring to boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Discard thyme. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Cool, cover and chill. Bring to simmer before serving.)

FOR FLANS: Preheat oven to 300°F. Place six ¾-cup custard cups or soufflé dishes in baking pan. Melt butter in heavy medium skillet over medium heat. Add onions; sauté until tender but not brown, about 8 minutes. Cool slightly; transfer to blender. Add cream, eggs, salt and pepper; blend until smooth. Stir in cheese. Divide custard among prepared cups. Fill pan with enough hot water to come

halfway up sides of cups. Bake flans until centers are softly set, about 30 minutes.

Cool flans 10 minutes in pan. Cut around flans to loosen; turn out each in center of soup bowl. Ladle soup around flans and serve.

**TORTILLA ESPAÑOLA**

**LA PAELLA, LOS ANGELES**

A delicious starter from executive chef Pasqual Franqueza and chef Santos Telles.


8 TO 10 SERVINGS

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cups chopped onions
- 1½ teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
- 2 pounds russet potatoes, peeled, sliced into ¼-inch-thick rounds
- ¼ cup water
  
- 8 large eggs
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- Nonstick vegetable oil spray

Chopped fresh parsley

Heat oil in large nonstick ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions and thyme; sauté until onions are translucent, about 5 minutes. Mix in potatoes; sprinkle with salt and pepper. Add ¼ cup water. Reduce heat to medium; cover and simmer until potatoes are tender, stirring occasionally, about 20 minutes. Uncover; simmer to allow any excess water to evaporate. Cool.

Preheat broiler. Beat eggs, salt and pepper in large bowl to blend. Add potato mixture. Spray same skillet with nonstick spray. Heat over medium-high heat. Add potato-egg mixture; cook 5 minutes, flattening top if potatoes are uneven. Cook 3 minutes, pulling in sides of tortilla to let uncooked egg run to sides. Cover and cook until almost set, about 3 minutes. Broil until top is brown, about 3 minutes.

Slide spatula around edges and under tortilla to loosen. Place large plate atop skillet; invert tortilla onto plate. Sprinkle with parsley. 

FOR RESTAURANT INFORMATION, SEE PAGE 26.

T E S T - K I T C H E N T I P

When buying onions, whether yellow, red or white, look for ones that are heavy for their size with no dark patches, moistness or soft spots. Their skins should be dry and blemish-free. Store in a cool, dry place with sufficient air circulation for up to one month.