



Lessons from Liver & Onions

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My mother, rest her soul, would be the first to say she wasn't a great cook. She only started cooking in her senior year of high school, learning what she could from home economics class before she married my dad that May. Our church also held monthly homemaking workshops, from which she would adopt new recipes into the menu rotation at home. Most of the time, we lived in rural areas and raised some of what we ate, including beef, pork, chicken, and rabbits.

Meat was my mother's Achilles' heel. Except for ground beef and pork chops, everything she cooked was tough and well done. We got used to chewing and chewing our meat

for however long it took to get it down, but we never got used to eating liver.

Whenever liver was cooked, the smell was undeniable. We knew there was no escape. Resigned to the upcoming battle, we began to think of ways to get out of eating it, which was not easy, since we didn't have a dog. We couldn't hide it in other food on the plate because there was a strict clean-plate policy in our house. We couldn't move it from our mouths to a napkin because she was always watching. The best defense was to try to flick it off the plate 'on accident' onto the floor while cutting it. Other than that, there wasn't much else to do but succumb to the torture and get it over with.



The liver, although sliced thin, was rubbery and tough, the corners slightly upturned. Even using a serrated knife required some elbow grease. The smaller the piece, the easier it was to chew. The smell would intensify the closer my fork got to my mouth, and then I'd pinch my nose with my other hand—a necessary tactic (introduced by the same person who had cooked the liver!). Then I chewed as fast as I could, trying to swallow before I gagged. Unfortunately, that meat was as tough as shoe leather, so no matter how small the pieces were, I couldn't get them down before that gag reflex kicked in.

“I chewed as fast as I could, trying to swallow before I gagged.”

This was my experience with liver. Ugh!

Years went on, and I had my own children. I made a commitment to myself that I would never create such unpleasant experiences with food for them. They were never made to eat liver, lima beans, asparagus, brussels sprouts, cabbage, or onions.

Then one day, almost thirty years later, my fiancé, Matt, asks me, “Do you like liver?”

“No, I hate liver. Who doesn't?” I reply.

Matt grew up in a family with even less money than my own and has shared his own similar experiences with food, such as being stuck eating the same thing for over a month because that was all his mother could afford. To this day, he won't eat split pea soup.

“You must have had it incorrectly prepared,” he says. “Let me make it for you. Just give it a try before you make up your mind.”

Now what you need to know is that

Matt is an excellent cook.

He can make something great out of an empty pantry. Everything he touches explodes with flavor!

“What if he can make liver palatable?” I care more

about not hurting his feelings than whether or not he can make liver edible, so I begrudgingly agree.

I sit at the dining table and watch as Matt begins preparing the liver—first washing it, then laying it out on baking sheets. After patting the liver dry, he seasons it lightly with salt, onion powder, garlic, and pepper (in that order) on both sides. Next, he starts to cut up several onions.



Onions? I hate onions.

The only experience I have with onions is picking them off McDonald's cheeseburgers.

Oh man, this is gonna be worse than I thought!

Next, Matt gets a shallow dish out.

“What is that for?” I ask.

“Just wait, you'll see,” he replies.

Into the dish goes flour, and then, one by one, each liver steak is lightly covered with flour and put aside.

The sliced onions go into a large cast-iron skillet—sizzling and pungent. He cooks them for quite a while. My eyes are starting to burn just a bit, and the smell is stronger than that

of the liver (especially since the steaks are now encased in flour).

Another cast-iron skillet is brought out. One by one, each steak is lightly browned on both sides and removed to another baking sheet until all the steaks are browned.

After removing some of the onions from the first pan, Matt pours in a bit of water. The steaks are arranged in a single layer in the pan, and the cooked onions are placed on top.

Then he puts on the lid.

“Now we wait,” he says.

“Wait for what?” I ask.

“For the gravy to appear.”

“What?”





“You’ll see.”

Now I know what gravy is. It comes in little packets that you add water to and heat up. I didn’t see him pull out a packet or pour in any of that gravy powder into the pan.

We wait. Every now and then, he lifts the lid, flips the steaks, and checks the onions.

We wait some more.

Then, according to Matt, the onions are translucent, and the gravy is ready.

Now this is nothing like I have ever seen. Liver steaks and soft, see-through onions swim in a pale gravy. Still, it has a faint liver-y smell. I am still not convinced.

Then it happens.

A plate of mashed potatoes, liver steak, onions, and gravy is presented to me. I ask for a knife.

“A knife? You don’t need a knife. You can cut it with a fork.”

Yeah, right! I think, reaching for my fork.

My fork sinks through the steak as if it were butter on a hot day.

No way. Can’t be! What magical transformation has taken place here?

But how does it taste?

A small piece of liver is on my fork, along

with a bit of onion. Trepidatiously, I place them on my tongue, and as I start to chew, I am astonished.

This is really good!

I don’t need to say anything. Matt can see from the look on my face that I am having an out-of-body experience.

I hardly need to chew; the steak melts in my mouth. The velvety gravy complements the soft, savory onions that, to my surprise, are delicious.

“Wow!” I finally come up for air. “I can’t believe this is liver!”

“You see, I told you,” Matt declares. “You haven’t had liver prepared properly.”

“You’re right about that,” I agree.

I remember the cruel and unusual punishment (liver ala shoe) dished out by my mother. Then I realized a hard truth: she didn’t know any better. I wonder what other foods I have missed out on.

Since that day, Matt has reintroduced me to cabbage stuffed with meat and smothered in a savory sauce, sautéed mushrooms, and chicken gizzards fried with crisp breading. I have even had alligator (yes, it does taste like chicken)!



About The Author



Lacey Wynes, a recent
Technical and
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graduate, has been
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