

Soupe à l'Oignon Gratinée (French Onion Soup)

Serves 6

This recipe appeared in The Times in a 1974 article by Richard Olney and was later featured in [an article by Amanda Hesser in the Times in 2007](#). I've adapted their luscious main course soup (or savory bread pudding or panade) here, incorporating just a few of my own changes and additions. Thanks to Samin Nosrat for ideas discovered and utilized from her smart and fun February 4, 2018 update in the NYT Magazine. Give yourself a good 2 1/2 hours to make the dish, depending on how quickly you can slice 12 cups of onions or grate 9 ounces of cheese! (That's why God made food processors.) Once it's in the oven, you have an hour to do as you please. Please read through carefully before beginning. If you have really stale baguette (French bread), skip the toasting.

- 4 medium yellow onions, cut in half and thinly sliced (about 6 cups)
- 4 medium white onions, cut in half and thinly sliced (about 6 cups)
- 9 tablespoons salted butter, softened--divided (4 tablespoons for cooking onions, 5 tablespoons for spreading on bread)
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- 1 baguette, cut into 1/2-inch slices (about 24 pieces)
- 4 ounces Emmental cheese, finely grated (save 1/4 cup out for topping)
- 5 ounces Gruyere cheese, finely grated (save 1/4 cup out for topping)
- 1 1/2 quarts water (may need a bit less or more depending on size on pot)
- 1 cup tomato purée (easiest: drain a can of chopped tomatoes and purée in the food processor)

1. In a 5 or 6 -quart sauté pan*, melt 4 tablespoons butter over medium heat. Add the onions, season with 1/4 teaspoon each salt and pepper. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until nearly soft. Remove lid, raise heat a bit and continue to cook, watching carefully, until golden brown--perhaps as long as an 30-40 minutes or more. Patience is your finest virtue. Don't give up and raise the heat in the interest of time as the onions may burn.

2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place slices of bread on a rimmed baking sheet and toast the them for 10 minutes. Remove sheet from oven. Flip each piece of bread over, return to oven, and let toast another 5 minutes. Remove to a rack and let them cool. Spread a generous layer of butter on each slice (you will need about 5 tablespoons), then lay the slices close together on a baking sheet and top with all but 1/2 cup of cheese--1/4 cup of each kind. (You'll top the dish with that reserved cheese in a moment.)

3. In a saucepan or kettle, bring 1 1/2 quarts water to a boil and stir in 1 tablespoon kosher salt for a couple minutes until melted. No, it's not too much salt.

4. While the water comes to a boil: In a 5-quart casserole or heavy, oven-safe pot (I use a 5 1/2-quart cast iron Le Creuset pot), arrange a layer of buttered bread and cheese slices (about 1/3 of them). Spread 1/3 of the cooked onions on top, followed by 1/3 of the tomato purée. Repeat for two more layers. Sprinkle with the reserved 1/2 cup cheese. To avoid boiling over, the casserole must not be more than 2/3 full.

5. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees again if you haven't left it on. At the edge of the bread, butter, and cheese, gently push back the layers from top to bottom to create a small space (about 1" x 2") to add the hot water. Very slowly and carefully pour the hot salted water-- using the space you've created--into the casserole so that the liquid rises just to the top layer of cheese without covering it. You may need to stop, press down the bread layers, allow the water to absorb, and then continue pouring. (Depending on the size of your casserole, you may need more or less water.)

6. Put the casserole or pot on the stove and simmer uncovered for 30 minutes, transfer to a baking sheet, and place the oven and bake uncovered for 1 hour. The soup or panade is ready when the surface looks like a crusty, golden cake and the inside is unctuous and so well blended that it is impossible to discern either cheese or onion. Each person is served some of the baked crust and some of the inside, which should be thick but not completely without liquid.

*If you don't have a sauté pan 4 or so inches deep, you can accomplish this in two large skillets or in a heavy soup pot, though the soup pot could take even longer. There are 12 cups of onions that you don't want to cook in too deep of a layer or they may never brown.

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