

Rory O'Connell-How to Eat Well Recipes

French Onion Soup with Thyme Leaves and Gruyère Toasts

Serves 6

French onion soup is probably the best known and loved of all French soups. It was a favourite for breakfast in the cafes beside the old markets at Les Halles in Paris and is still a favourite on bistro menus at Rungis market. In France this soup is served in special white porcelain tureens. Gruyere is the cheese traditionally used for the toast to serve with the soup but a good sharp cheddar will make an excellent substitute. The soup will keep for a couple of days in the fridge and freezes really well.

1.35kg onions

50g butter

4 branches of thyme tied together with cotton string

1.7Litre chicken stock (or vegetable stock for a vegetarian version)

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

To Finish

6 slices of baguette, cut 1cm thick and toasted

75g grated Gruyère cheese

Peel the onions and slice thinly. Melt the butter in a saucepan. Add the onion, thyme branches and toss well. Cook on a low heat for about 40-60 minutes with the lid off, stirring frequently - the onions should be dark and well caramelised but not burnt.

Add the stock, season with salt and freshly ground pepper, bring to the boil and simmer for a further 5 minutes. Taste and correct seasoning.

Ladle the very hot soup into deep and hot soup bowls. Place a piece of toasted baguette generously covered with grated cheese on top of each one. Pop under the grill until the cheese melts and turns golden. Serve immediately but beware - it will be very hot.

Grilled T-bone Steak with Bearnaise Sauce

The Ingredients

Order the beef a week ahead from your butcher. Its an expensive treat and you will benefit from planning ahead

Serves 4

2 T-bone steaks cut 4cm thick or 1 T-bone steak cut 8cm thick

2 teaspoons olive oil for rubbing on the steak

1 cut clove of garlic

Maldon sea salt and freshly ground or cracked black pepper

Heat a heavy grill pan or pans until very hot. You may just see a haze of heat coming from the pan. While the pan is heating, rub the beef on both sides with the olive oil as if you were meanly moisturising them. With a small knife, score the fat on top of the steaks to allow some of the fat to render out in the cooking and to allow the remaining fat to crisp up. Season generously on both sides with salt and pepper. Place the steaks on the heated grill pan, leaving at least 2 cm space between them if cooking more than one. They should sizzle immediately. Cook on one side until a rich colour has developed, and if you want, giving the steak a 90 degree turn half way through the cooking to attain a grid of marks on the cooked meat. Turn and cook on the other side until cooked to your liking. You will need to carefully control the heat all the way through the cooking. If the pan gets too hot you will burn the steaks and if the pan becomes cool, the meat will stew and toughen.

Place the cooked steaks, a little apart from each other, on an upturned plate sitting on a larger plate, to capture any juices that run from the resting beef. Allow to rest for at least 5 minutes and up to 15 minutes seems to work for me. The thick, 4 portion T-bone will rest happily for 30 minutes before serving. Keep them warm during the resting period in a warm oven set to 110c / 220f / gas ¼ .

Bring the steak to the table on a chopping board, putting any collected meat juices into a little jug. First carve off the fillet and slice on to hot plates. Then remove the sirloin from the bone and carve the meat either with, or against the grain. Pour a little of the meat juices over the beef and serve passing the béarnaise sauce separately.

Béarnaise Sauce

The consistency of Béarnaise sauce should be considerably thicker than that of Hollandaise or beurre blanc, both of which ought to be a light coating consistency. If you do not have tarragon vinegar to hand, use wine vinegar and add some extra chopped fresh French tarragon.

Serves 8–10

4 tablespoons tarragon vinegar

4 tablespoons dry white wine

2 teaspoons finely chopped shallots

pinch of freshly ground pepper

2 organic egg yolks

110g butter

Pinch of cayenne pepper

1 tablespoon (1 American tablespoon + 1 teaspoon) freshly chopped French tarragon leaves

Boil the first 4 ingredients together in a low, heavy-bottomed, stainless-steel saucepan until completely reduced and the pan is almost dry but not browned. Add 1 tablespoon (1 American tablespoon + 1 teaspoon) of cold water immediately. Pull the pan off the heat and leave to cool for 1 or 2 minutes.

Using a coil whisk, whisk in the egg yolks and add the butter bit by bit over a very low heat, whisking all the time. As soon as one piece melts, add the next piece; it will gradually thicken. If it shows signs of becoming too thick or slightly scrambling, remove from the heat immediately and add a little cold water. Do not leave the pan or stop whisking until the sauce is made. Finally, add 1 tablespoon (1 American tablespoon + 1 teaspoon) of freshly chopped French tarragon and taste for seasoning.

If the sauce is slow to thicken, it may be because you are excessively cautious and the heat is too low. Increase the heat slightly and continue to whisk until all the butter is added and the sauce is a thick coating consistency. It is important to remember, however, that if you are making Béarnaise sauce in a saucepan directly over the heat,

it should be possible to put your hand on the side of the saucepan at any stage. If the saucepan feels too hot for your hand it is also too hot for the sauce!