

Uncle Moose's Easy Étouffée



KPCooks

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from September 2022



I don't know why we called him Uncle Moose. He was my dad's brother-in-law, his name was Murph, and he bore about as much resemblance to a moose as would a Methodist minister, which is what he really looked like. As far as I knew, he was born wearing a white button-down shirt and a thin black tie, with silver hair slicked straight back from his forehead. But the blazing red, floor-length Budweiser apron he wore in the kitchen suggested a rich inner life.

Uncle Moose was born on a Minnesota farm in the 19-teens (he claimed not to remember when) and somehow grew up to spend the latter 1930s in the U.S. Navy flying a PBY Catalina, a lumbering twin-engine seaplane with a crew of eight and three swivel-mounted machine guns, charting the Coral Sea. The charts the Navy then had were based on surveys done by Capt. Cook, and someone in the War Depart-

ment realized maybe they should be updated in case the U.S. had to fight the Japanese Empire anytime soon.

During World War II, Moose flew his PBY on reconnaissance missions and in October 1942 he found the Japanese task force on its way to the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands during the Guadalcanal campaign. He reported and fled, but shot down two pursuing enemy fighters by putting his plane into a steep turn that allowed all three of his machine gunners to bear down on each target. He ran out of gas and spent a long, seasick night in the drink before being refueled by a passing submarine at dawn. He got his PBY and crew back to base, received the Distinguished Flying Cross, and was sent home to sell war bonds.

Moose traveled all over the country. He'd grown up playing piano in church and while visiting New Orleans also picked up the

trumpet and clarinet and, according to him, could sit in with any decent combo. He could play the hell out of the piano and drink all of us under the table; still, it was hard to picture this Methodist minister pounding out jazz in New Orleans.

But the étouffée recipe he learned, in circumstances that remain unknown, is proof enough. (I mean, how does an unmarried war hero traveling the South selling war bonds and playing jazz learn how to cook anything?) It's basically a sauce used to "smother" (that's what étouffée means) whatever else you're eating. The classic foundation is the Holy Trinity of onion, celery and green bell pepper sautéed in a roux the color of the Mississippi River (at Natchez in summertime), topped with crawfish, shrimp or crab.

I've simplified it in a way purists will object to, but no one cares what they think but them.

Étouffée

Serves 4 with rice

- 4 ounces vegetable oil
- 4 ounces white flour
- 2 cups chopped onions, whatever but not red
- 1 cup chopped green bell peppers or your favorite color
- 1 cup chopped celery, if you must
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic or more to taste
- 1 can chopped tomatoes or a couple handfuls of cherry tomatoes
- Some amount of some kind of stock (more on this below)
- A pound or so of your preferred shellfish, if any
- Some kind of Cajun spice (more on this below)

Possible heathen variations: Red bell pepper instead of green; omit celery and maybe tomatoes; add andouille sausage; forget shellfish; use other fish.

1. Let's get the first act of sacrilege out of the way with this heretical roux. I've spent so many hours stirring flour into lard my roux spoon has been worn down to a triangle. I still do it that way from time to time when I get nostalgic, but I picked up a much easier method somewhere that's foolproof. Stir the oil and flour into a Dutch oven and bake it uncovered for 90 minutes at 350. Give it a stir once or twice. That's it.

2. Transfer Dutch oven to stove. Add onions and gently heat until they start to simmer. If you burn that glorious golden roux, start over. Add garlic, peppers and celery (I prefer to do without celery, but follow your heart.) Sprinkle with a bit of salt.

3. If you like tomatoes, add now with juice; if not, don't. I've found cherry tomatoes are a nice addition and I don't even like tomatoes. When they start to burst, it's time for stock.

4. Next act of sacrilege. Tradition calls for shrimp stock that you've already prepared with the shells of the peeled shrimp, which is easy. Just cover shells, a few pepper corns and half a carrot if you've got one with two cups of water and simmer for 15 minutes or more and you're done.

I always do it when using Dungeness crab I've shelled myself; it's worth it. But if you're feeling lazy, which I often am, just add chicken or veggie stock, or even clam juice if you can stand it (I can't). Whatever you use, add just enough to get things floating without flooding.

5. Bring it to a simmer and move on to the next sin: seasoning. You can use some store-bought Cajun mixture, but I've found it convenient to add a couple sliced links of andouille sausage to subtly flavor the whole dish. After 30 minutes of simmering, taste and adjust by adding a bit of cayenne, sweet smoked paprika, oregano or thyme, or even garlic or onion powder if it needs a boost. Give it another 10 or so and test again until it's right.

6. If you're using shellfish, now is the time. Continue cooking gently until it's done, at least five minutes but double that if you can to let the sauce soak in.

7. Serves four with rice and chopped scallions but you might need to add more of something depending on who those four are. I put a skillet of buttery cornbread next to it when in doubt.