

Chapter 2 - The Many Faces of Mustard

It's a pity that mustard is so badly understood, because it's one of the all-time great spices. Mustard's bad, or at least lackluster, reputation comes from the fact that hot-dog eaters call that bright-yellow condiment "mustard", when in fact it contains almost no mustard at all.

There's no mistaking *real* mustard. That sinus-blistering stuff you dip your barbecued beef in at the Chinese restaurant, *that's* real mustard, and, contrary to popular belief, *very* similar to what you can buy in the grocery store.

Although it seems limiting, when I say mustard from now on I mean plain, common, buy-every-day-at-any-grocery-store-in-the-country dry mustard powder, the stuff in the rectangular yellow tin can that looks almost like it did fifty years ago, sitting right there on your supermarket's spice shelf. This stuff is exactly what you need to make sauces that will virtually leap off your plate and slap you to attention. It's really that good. To improve your selection of mustards, try mail-order mustard powder and seed from Penzey's Spices

But it's a bit quirky, mustard is. Dip a finger into this dry beige powder, and lick it, to get the *nastiest* taste you ever had, with no chemical fire whatsoever. If there were no one to guide you, to get you past your first encounter with the stuff, you might give up on mustard right now, with that *terrible* taste in your mouth. I'm going to call this mustard Phase I.

So mix a bit of the powder into a dab of water, and keep it from drying out for a couple of hours, and then give *that* the taste test. But be careful, because now the mustard is very like the Chinese mustard, pure blow-your-ears-off fire, and yet a bit sweet, somehow. It's in this phase (call it Phase II) that mustard is at its most assertive, but some subtleties apply here. As the prepared Phase II mustard ages at room temperature, it mellows slowly, over a period of days or weeks, and its flavor richens. When you place the mellowing mustard in the refrigerator, the mellowing action stops, and the mustard may be kept for a very long time.

If you take a bit of hot/sweet phase II mustard and cook it (this'll be Phase III), yet another chemical change takes place. After cooking the mustard becomes a fairly mild substance, with just a trace of its former boldness, but with a kind of sweetness. In the next couple of recipes listed here, this is a phase to be avoided, and you will see special steps taken to avoid cooking the fire out of the mustard.

Now, armed with this knowledge, go forth and create; these recipes are only a start.

Sweet/Hot Prepared Mustard

In a glass or ceramic bowl, mix 1 cup dry mustard powder with 1/2 cup cold water, 1/4 cup any kind of vinegar, and 1 tablespoon of honey or sugar. Stir until the lumps are gone, and let it stand at room temperature until it is the desired mildness, up to 2 months, then refrigerate and/or use.

I collect small glass jars and lids for just this purpose, and I may have two or three different kinds of mustard in process at one time. I may have a batch made without sweetening and aged for a week; that's hot Chinese mustard. I may have a batch with some of the mustard powder replaced with coarse-ground mustard seed and aged for two months; I call that my German mustard.

Pretty Close Counterfeit Wendy's Pink Sauce

Note: This has nothing to do with the hamburger chain

In a previous life, I lived outside a small town in southern Oregon, where several of us would meet to eat lunch in the back room of a great Chinese restaurant. Wendy, one of the owners, acted as waitress in the back room where the regulars ate, and lunch was leavened with a running banter with Wendy.

On every table was a small ketchup bottle containing a creamy, sweet-sour, pink-orange pungent sauce that we put on almost everything. Wendy avoided giving it the sauce a name, and it was called only "that pink sauce".

Although it varied a lot from day to day, this stuff was so good that I *had* to have the recipe, but when any question about pink sauce ingredients came up, Wendy would become uncharacteristically quiet. I was being quietly, politely, stonewalled.

So I went to work in the kitchen.

The consistency of pink sauce was very much like the sauce you get by cooking beaten egg in an acid, vinegar, say. Because the egg-vinegar sauce is already sour, sweetening it to the correct sweet/sour balance would be easy.

And the kick-in-the-head pungency? My old friend mustard. Of course.

OK then. Vinegar, egg, and sugar, cooked until it thickens, cool it so you don't murder the mustard, and add pre-soaked mustard to the *cooled* sauce. After a bit of fiddling and adjusting, I was really close, but the sauce was very yellow, and missing a bit of complexity.

In a flash of divine insight, I added a couple of splashes of ketchup, and it was perfect! I began playing with proportions, mostly varying the mustard content. Mildly pungent for egg rolls and fried rice, about the heat of a hot horseradish for my nutmeg-breaded fried chicken livers.

Understand, now, that this does not pretend to be truly Wendy's pink sauce, but it is a delicious counterfeit. And later, at lunch, one of the lunch group told Wendy, "Bob's figured out the recipe for pink sauce."

Wendy asked me what I used and I told her.

For a few seconds Wendy studied me *very* shrewdly indeed, and then said, "Pretty close."

So here it is, "Pretty Close Counterfeit Wendy's Pink Sauce."

4 eggs	1 cup cider vinegar	1 cup granulated sugar
1/4 cup dry Coleman's dry mustard		coupla glops of ketchup

In a cup or small bowl, mix the mustard with enough water to achieve a consistency like light cream. Set this aside for a couple/four hours (this is going to be *hot*, right?).

Put the eggs, vinegar, and sugar in a blender and blend it for a few seconds, or whisk it, or beat it. Just get it mixed up.

At this point, you've got to make a judgement about what kind of cook you are. If you are *very* conscientious and will *never* stop stirring, and if you have a good flat-ended stirrer, you can put the mixture in a saucepan and bring it to a boil, *stirring constantly*.

If, however, you are inclined to cheat, to let your attention wander from the job at hand, even for the *teensiest* time, put this stuff in the top of a double boiler, or you'll scorch it for sure.

As soon as the mixture comes to a complete boil, add a couple of splats of ketchup and set it aside to cool. Remember, this cooling is important so you don't kill the mustard.

To the cooled sauce, add a teaspoonful of the mustard mix, whisk to mix thoroughly, and taste. Repeat as necessary until you arrive at the desired pungency. Remember, you may want different degrees of pungency for different foods. The very sharpest pink sauce, about horseradish hot, I reserve for the following recipe, which I include so you can use your first batch of pink sauce.

Nutmeg-Breaded Chicken Livers With Pink Sauce

Go through a pound of good fresh chicken livers, and with a sharp knife cut off all the uglies, connective tissue, and fat, and cut the larger pieces to the size of a small walnut.

In a big paper bag (the biggest grocery store size) mix 1 cup flour, 1 tsp salt, and 2 T nutmeg. Close the bag and hold the top shut with your right hand and support the bag bottom with your left. Shake bag to mix contents.

Open the bag and drop 8-10 pieces of liver into the bag, individually so they don't stick together. Shake again for a few seconds to coat the liver. Remove the pieces from the bag and arrange them on a plate so they don't stick together. Repeat until all the liver is floured.

Heat about 1/2 inch of oil in a skillet to frying temperature, and drop in enough liver to mostly cover the bottom of the pan. When the pieces are brown and crunchy on the bottom, turn them over and brown the other side. Protect yourself, because this stuff pops and shoot hot oil spatters.

Remove from the pan, drain on paper towels, and serve these hot, with very pungent pink sauce on the side.

The nutmeg negates some of the strong liver flavor, and with pink sauce you could eat a sneaker, so many confirmed liver-haters will snarf these babies up like popcorn.

After living with this chapter for a while, I remembered that I *do* know a good recipe for Phase III mustard, when it's had some of the heat cooked out. This recipe came from my mother, bless her, and was one of my favorite comfort foods.

Swiss Steak Pounded with Mustard and Onion Gravy

Basically, all Swiss steak recipes involved banging flour into the surface of the raw meat with some sort of utensil, browning in hot oil, and adding liquid which, with the flour, thickens into a gravy. Mom's recipe differed from the basic in two major respects: flour *and* dry mustard were pounded into the steak, and lots of diced cooked onion enhanced the thickening. The steak's gorgeous, and the gravy goes with mashed potatoes like puppies go with kids.

Get a pound or two of meat labelled as Swiss steak, or thick round steak, two medium onions, a cup of flour (it's OK, some of it gets lost in the process), a tablespoon or two of dry mustard, and enough oil to fry the steak, maybe three or four tablespoons.

Here's the fun part. You've got to drive the flour and mustard into the fibers of the meat, while breaking some of those fibers, thereby tenderizing the meat. Kitchen stores are full of devices to do this, spiky hammer/hatchet whacker things reminiscent of dungeon toys, but a simple saucer or small plate is the best Swiss steak whacker of them all. It worked for Mom, it works for me, and it'll work for you.

Put the meat on a wooden or plastic cutting board, rub the uppermost surface of the meat with flour and mustard, and strike the meat with the edge of the plate. In the process, some of the flour and mustard will bounce off the meat on to the cutting board. Scoop it back up and put it back on the meat, so that every whack of the plate hits both flour and meat. If you have to add more flour and mustard, do it. Repeat until the entire surface of the steak has been beaten, then turn the steak 90 degrees and whack it all over again, so that the dents you make crosshatch the surface of the steak.

When you have one side of the meat whacked full of flour and mustard, turn the steak over and repeat the whole process on the other side.

Get a skillet with a good-fitting lid (an electric skillet is a really good choice), add the oil, and heat to high frying temperature. Toss in the meat and brown thoroughly on both side. Don't cheat on the browning and give up early; serious browning is important to the flavor development of this recipe.

When the meat is thoroughly browned, remove the steak and set aside. Dice the onions into 1/4" to 1/2" cubes, and put the diced onion in the skillet from which you removed the meat. Fry the onions at medium heat until transparent and starting to brown.

Put the steak back into the pan with the browned onions, and add sufficient water to barely cover the steak. When the liquid boils, cover the pan and turn the heat down to simmer.

Continue simmering for an hour to an hour-and-a-half, until the meat is tender. Check a few time during the simmering process to verify that the meat does not cook dry and scorch; add water as necessary. When the steak is ready, you should have a lovely lumpy thick gravy. Don't sweat the lumps; these are cooked-up onions, and make this gravy a killer topping for mashed potatoes.