Mom’s American Chop Suey

Serves 6 to 8
By Dennis W. Viau; my mother’s recipe.

One of my relatives asked me to document my mother’s recipes because she died more than 20 years ago. Her recipes would be lost if not written down. She was not a great cook, but this is one of my favorites. It is not a sensational recipe, but it is delicious comfort food.

I grew up with my mother’s American Chop Suey. It is probably made throughout the United States with different variations and called by different names. One person from Cajun country said it is called goulash there. A friend from Texas said his mother made it with bell peppers and called it ‘sghetti and beef. Yet another person says it’s beef-a-roni. In New England we called it American Chop Suey. The origin is obviously Italian, being made with macaroni and ragu. How it gained the name chop suey, which is an American creation of cooked vegetables sort of Chinese in style, is beyond me. My Italian mother made it often and it wasn’t until I figured out she caramelized the onions that I was able to duplicate her recipe.

Ingredients:
- 2 tablespoons olive oil for frying
- ½ large or 1 medium (10 to 11 oz./280 to 310 g) onion; chopped
- 1 pound (454g) lean ground beef
- 2 cups (527g) marinara sauce
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Optional: 1 bell pepper; chopped
- 2 cups (9 oz./255g) elbow macaroni or other small dry pasta
- Parmesan or Romano cheese for garnish

Directions:
- Heat the oil in a large skillet and sauté chopped onion until it changes to a rich golden color, 20 to 30 minutes, reducing the heat to low if necessary toward the end of caramelization.
- Start heating the water (about 3 quarts/3 liters) to cook the pasta. Add about a tablespoon of salt to the boiling water before adding the pasta.
- Add the ground beef to the onion and sauté until cooked. It is not necessary to brown the meat, but doing so will add more flavor.
- If desired, remove the meat mixture from skillet and sauté the chopped bell pepper until tender. Add the meat mixture and the marinara sauce. Mix well.
- Cook the macaroni according to package directions, typically 10 to 12 minutes, until al dente. Drain and combine with the ragu sauce mixture, stirring to coat the pasta evenly. Heat before serving.
- Serve hot. Garnish with cheese at the table.

The Step By Step guide begins on the following page.
I do not like bell peppers, but I am showing it here as an optional ingredient. I won’t be using it in this preparation, but it is authentic in some parts of the USA.

I typically do not chop onions the way the professional chefs do, but I’m trying. I am working with half a large onion. You leave the root end attached, cut down from root to top almost cutting to the root, then slice inward from the top toward the root. That last part makes me uncomfortable because I am cutting toward my hand. Finally, you cut the onion perpendicular to the other cuts, reducing it to evenly sized pieces.
When you finish chopping, it should look like this. I did this the proper way; so I’m satisfied with it.

Caramelized onions are important for the flavor of this dish. I started with medium-high heat, added the oil and onion to the skillet, and then reduced the heat gradually as the onion changed color and darkened. Total cooking time for these onions was 30 minutes.

Add the ground beef to the onions and sauté over medium-high heat until cooked, 4 to 5 minutes. If you want to add the bell pepper, remove the meat mixture from the pan and sauté the chopped bell peppers until tender or slightly crisp. Return the meat mixture to the pan.
Finally, add the marinara to the pan and heat thoroughly. This meat ragu is ready for the pasta.

Cook the elbow macaroni according to package directions, typically 10 to 12 minutes, until tender or *al dente*. Drain and combine with the ragu to coat evenly.
Serve warm with plenty of Parmesan or Romano cheese for garnish at the table.

**Conclusion**

This simple dish is hardly *gourmet* and it is probably common in many parts of the United States. I document it here as one of my mother’s recipes and this food is something I continue to make. I especially love it on cold winter days when it is raining outside. My dining room table is next to a large window and I really enjoy sitting at the table, eating comfort food, and watching it rain outside.