

Saturday Night Dips

Harold and Opal Jenner were, well, let's say a little on the social side. When Saturday night rolled around, we either had Swanson TV dinners while watching the Lawrence Welk Show before the baby sitter arrived or we sat in our bedrooms listening to loud, raucous, bourbon-infused crowds long past our bedtime. The thing that made this disruption of our weekends all worth it was the creamy dips that Opal made whenever she hosted. She always made an extra little bowl of dip for me and my brother to taste before the party. It was either onion or clam dip-or both. I especially liked the clam dip. I'm not exactly sure if Opal made her dips from scratch, but we will.

Real Deal French Onion Dip

How hard can onion dip be? Just mix a packet of Lipton onion soup mix with a pound of sour cream. The legend is that a waiter in a Los Angeles restaurant was stuck and needed something quick, so he mixed a packet of onion soup mix with sour cream. It caught on. By the time Lipton got wind of it, more of their product was going into dips than into soups. They adjusted their onion soup formula to optimize it for dip. Of course, they also used artificial colors and preservatives. If you like onion dip made from a packet of powder and dried particles, you will fall in love with one made from scratch. The first difference you will notice when you make it from scratch is the incredible depth of flavor. You will also notice that this recipe is for "French" onion dip, and the Lipton package says simply "Onion" dip. What's the difference? "French" onion dip or soup involves caramelizing the sugars in the onion. You don't just want to soften the onions like we do for most of my dishes. This was one of the most surprising things I learned during my culinary training: onions are actually packed full of sugar. For this dish, you want to draw out all the water and caramelize the sugars, so you need to cook the onions in the pan for a full 20 minutes. The onion bits should get very brown, and maybe even tiny bit crispy, but not burned. This cooking process not only adds tremendous flavor to the dip but gives it the "traditional" color. No artificial coloring required.

Ingredients

2 TBS Lodi olive oil
1 onion, diced
3/4 tsp salt
3/4 cup sour cream
1/3 cup mayonnaise
1/8 tsp (pinch) garlic powder
1/8 tsp (pinch) white pepper

Heat a 10-inch fry pan to medium heat. Coat the pan with the olive oil. Drop the onions in and begin stirring. Add 1/2 teaspoon of salt. Cook, stirring frequently. Stay with the onions after they start to brown (about 6 minutes) and stir frequently to evenly cook them. Cook them for about 20 minutes total until the onions are golden brown. Remove the pan from the heat and pour the onion bits in a cup or small bowl to let them cool for 5-10 minutes.

Place the sour cream, mayonnaise, garlic powder, white pepper, and the remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt in a medium sized mixing bowl and stir until blended. Add a couple of tablespoons of the cooked onion and stir. Check the mix for texture and color. If you want more onions, add two more tablespoons and stir. If you still need more onion, add another tablespoon and stir. Do not add more than 6 tablespoons of cooked onions. Transfer the mix to your serving cup or bowl. Cover and refrigerate for about an hour then stir again. This dip is better if you can make it the day before serving.

Tips and Tricks

Onions come in different sizes. If you get a very large onion and use the whole thing, your dip could get too, well, "oniony." If the dip is more onion bits than sauce, it can look unappealing. Start with the whole onion, cook it down, then use no more than 6 tablespoons of the cooked, cooled onion bits. If this turns out to be too much onion for you, use 5 or even 4 tablespoons. If you end up with too many onion bits, just add more sour cream.

The nice thing about making your own French onion dip is that you can choose the type of onion that best suits your flavor preference. Different types of onions will give you different flavor profiles. Red onions give you a bitter-sweet flavor. White onions give the dip a more subtle, balanced flavor. I prefer to use yellow onions, which gives you a dark, sweet, strong-tasting dip.

Be careful not to burn the onion bits. After 20 minutes in a fry pan at medium heat, they should get very brown and a maybe a tiny bit crispy, but take them off the burner if you start seeing and smelling smoke before the 20 minutes is up. Otherwise, the dip will be too bitter.

Delta Clam Dip

I never knew where the clams in Opal's dip came from. Since the only fishing I knew about was out in the Delta, west of Lodi, I assumed they came from the Delta. I always thought that Opal bought her clam dip from the grocery store, but I have never found an off-the-shelf clam dip in decades of looking for it. If you can get fresh clams, then good on ya'. If you can't, Bumble Bee canned minced clams are pretty easy to find and work well.

Ingredients

6.5-ounce can minced clams
8 ounces cream cheese
1/4 cup sour cream
2 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
1 TBS fresh parsley, cut fine brunoise
1 tsp Opal's Reserve Worcestershire sauce
1 tsp Old Uncle Lester's Pepper Sauce
1/2 tsp black pepper

Let the cream cheese set out on the counter until it reaches room temperature and is soft (about an hour). Open the can of clams and drain the juice into a cup to save it. With a fork, smash the cream cheese until it is smooth. Add one tablespoon of the reserved clam juice to the cheese and stir it in. Add the sour cream, garlic, parsley, Worcestershire sauce, pepper sauce, and black pepper and stir. Add the clams and stir them in. If the mix is too thick, you can add more clam juice, one teaspoon at a time. If you use a separate bowl to serve, transfer the contents to the serving bowl. Cover and refrigerate for about an hour then stir again.

Tips and Tricks

Add just enough clam juice to give you the consistency you want. If you are serving it the same day, whatever you get when you mix the ingredients will be the consistency at serving time (even if you refrigerate it for a couple of hours). If you plan to refrigerate it overnight before serving, you may want the mix to be a little runnier than desired, because it will harden a little in the refrigerator overnight. Maybe add an extra teaspoon or two of clam juice.

This savory version is pretty close to Opal's clam dip. However, I like it with a hint of fresh garden flavor complemented by the subtle tart of a lemon. For a fresher tasting version, I sometimes use one tablespoon of fresh squeezed lemon juice (1/2 lemon) and 2 green onions (cut fine brunoise) instead of the garlic, parsley, and black pepper.