



At Home With Annie

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Well, of course, in 25 years of cooking professionally, I've never burnt anything. Or maybe because I'm a food professional, I'm just not supposed to tell you about it.

For a short time, I worked at a restaurant in the early 90's that had perfected this technique. We'd just gotten a shipment of gorgeous morel mushrooms. For those who are unfamiliar, morel mushrooms are a rare commodity. They are smallish, elongated and look a bit like a collapsed umbrella made of honey comb. They are not all that lovely to look at but they have a heady flavor. The sous chef decided to make a big batch of creamy morel mushroom soup using those incredible, very expensive mushrooms. In restaurant terms, a big batch of soup means something made in a pot that is as high as anywhere between your knees and your thighs. Well...he burned the soup. Because he'd made so much with such a valuable ingredient, he doctored it and served it anyway.

The owner came in, tasted the soup and loved it. The head chef came in for his shift after the lunch rush was over and tasted the soup. As the sous chef tried to make himself busy while watching for the head chef's reaction, the head chef made a face and turned to him. He knew right away it was burnt. The sous chef, not wanting to be in huge trouble for having ruined so much food and such an expensive ingredient, suggested they serve it as a Hickory-Smoked Creamy Morel Mushroom Soup. He'd actually been serving it with that title all afternoon and the patrons loved it. My dad has a good chuckle at this story even now – he says it's all in how you package something. By the way, I was the prep cook in this story and had zero control over the final food decisions.

It turns out that in this instance, the flavor of the soup wasn't destroyed by being burnt. My hunch is that the cream saved it from extinction. There is also the ethical piece of this story to consider and there are times when something is charred beyond belief and it's time to just throw it out and start over or order out for pizza. But most times, burned items can become something else without wasting food. You just have to be quick about it.

What is important to remember, just as with the example of the mushroom soup, the charred flavor will permeate your food quickly, so remove it as soon as you can.

In the case of soups, as soon as you discover that you've burnt the bottom of the pot, do NOT scrape it. Transfer the contents (except for the charred bottom) to another pot and proceed with your recipe. Again, resist scraping the bottom of the burnt pan, that's where all the dark flaky parts come from, not to mention the scorched flavor.

Burnt casserole – sometimes you can salvage a casserole that's too dark on top by scraping off the dark parts, sprinkling with cheese and returning it to the oven for a short time.

Burnt bar cookies or cake – this is a little trickier and you have to gauge how much of your dessert is affected. If it's all around, it may be better to start again, but maybe the top can be scraped off and a layer of chocolate chips melted on top can replace it. A bit of frosting could be

just what the cake needs after the burnt layer is removed. Or perhaps adding your bars to ice cream or turning your cake into a trifle will save your dessert.

Burned meat - Remove the charred parts and make into a salad, soup, or frittata. Of course if it's grilled, we are all a bit more generous with the darker parts and it may be just fine.

Professional photographers don't show all of their pictures, they only present the ones that are good. Cooks do the same thing, if you can salvage a dish, great. If not, don't sweat it.

Now that most areas of Maine have had a good frost, it's a great time to get back to cooking those slow, warm-up-the-house dishes that comfort and soothe. Here's a good one to get back into the kitchen with.

Chicken Stew with Bacon and Tarragon

Serve w/spatzle, a German noodle, or mashed potatoes.

1/2 cup flour
1 teaspoon paprika
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon salt
4 pounds thighs, wings and drumsticks
6 strips of bacon cut into small slices
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons minced garlic
1 cup red wine
2 cups chicken stock
several tarragon sprigs, tied with a string
1/2 pound carrots cut into short sticks
1/2 pound frozen pearl onions

In a large bowl combine the first four ingredients. Fully coat chicken with seasoning and flour mixture. Heat olive oil in large stockpot over medium-high heat. Carefully add chicken skin-side down and brown on all sides, about 20 minutes. If all the pieces do not fit into the bottom of the pan, do in two batches. Set aside on a platter covered with aluminum foil. In the same pan, render the bacon. Drain the fat. Add the garlic and sauté for 30 seconds to one minute. Add red wine, chicken stock and tarragon sprigs and stir. Return the chicken to the pan and bring the sauce to a boil. Reduce heat and cover. Simmer for 30-40 minutes or until the chicken is tender. Add the carrots and pearl onions and simmer covered until also tender, another 10-15 minutes.

Serves 6-8

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For more recipes from Chef Annie visit her food blog at www.ArtichokesAndAsparagus.com.