

Home cookin' Southern-style: Red-eye gravy

By James P. DeWan
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My pervasive Roman Catholic sense of nagging guilt has been drowned out this week by a song that peaked at No. 3 in October 1970. "Green-eyed lady, lovely lad-eh." Remember that one?? "Green-Eyed Lady"?? The band was Sugarloaf. Look it up. You'll remember.

Regardless, and perhaps not coincidentally, that song has always been one of my guilty pleasures, along with a craving for breakfast sauces. Like — wait for it — red-eye gravy, lovely grav-eh. Just for example.

WHY YOU NEED TO LEARN THIS???

Madge may not have an Uncle Jed, but, she does have second cousin Buford, and one day she'll bring him over for Sunday brunch. On that bright morning, you're going to want to serve something that, as the great Southern cook Hoyt Tidwell would say, "will make you want to slap your grandma." And nothing, I tells ya, slaps grandma like a good old-fashioned red-eye gravy. After all, it's made with real, live, eye-opening nerve-jangling coffee. Wee, doggies.

Even better yet, the same method that gives us red-eye gravy also produces a host of other sauces, none of which, to my knowledge, is named after discolored organs. Let's take a look.

THE STEPS YOU TAKE?

Red-eye gravy belongs to a club we like to call "pan



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Red-eye gravy is a simple pan sauce made with the browned bits from searing some country ham slices and coffee. But you can doctor it, if you like.

saucers." Pan sauces are, yes, Dr. Wisey MacWiseneimer, sauces made in a pan. But, not just any pan, mind you. It's got to be a pan in which you have recently cooked something meatish, like, in the case of red-eye gravy, a big ol' slice o' ham.

A quick interlude about ham: Here on our adopted home planet, Earth, the natives enjoy many, many hammy iterations, all of which are somewhat different, most of which are delicious. While all hams are, by definition, the back leg of a pig that has been preserved, or "cured," those curing methods vary from style to style. Also, some hams are smoked,

and others are not. Country ham is a variety common in the American Southeast that's cured and most often smoked, similar somewhat to prosciutto or speck.

Now to the pan sauces. Here's the premise: When you cook proteins like meat or fish, juice splats into the hot pan and evaporates, leaving behind small but tasty smears of clumpy brown desiccation — like fond memories, if you will, of a departed friend. By stirring in liquid, those fond memories are reincarnated as a delicious sauce.

Most pan sauces include other flavoring ingredients: mustard, garlic, chutney, whatever. And they're thick-

ened, either by a gelatinous stock or with added flour or cornstarch.

Classic red-eye gravy has only a couple of ingredients: the browned bits from country ham (what I like to refer to as "ham squeezin's") and brewed coffee. To make it, you simply deglaze the former with the latter and reduce. It's like CliffNotes for pan sauce, and it's honestly that easy. Honest.

It's funny, though: I can smell your rising fear from here. "But, I'm in the North! I don't have country ham! And second cousin Buford's coming over!"

Sigh. Look, Lumpy, try not to panic. Just go to the deli and get a few slices of

ham off the bone, preferably with lots of fat that you can render for the searing. Trust me: It'll be delicious, and in my book, unless second cousin Buford happens to be the Kentuckian ambassador, delicious trumps authentic pert near every time.

Of course, if your goal is simply to make a pan sauce, any kind of meaty thing will do: pork chops, steak, even scrapple or its kissing cousin from out Cincinnati way, goetta. After all, it's just breakfast.

Admittedly, a problem with pan sauces is that there are so many different ways to make them, and it all depends on understanding how the ingredients relate to

the finished product.

Because of this, instead of trying to delineate a "one-size-fits-all" method, I'll just walk you through a couple of other sauces that'll be just dandy at the breakfast table, and you can take it from there. Serve them with eggs, biscuits, grits, whatever you like, and you can bet that Madge and Buford will be right pleased.

- Sausage gravy: Brown a pound of crumbled breakfast sausage, then sprinkle a couple of ounces of flour over it all and stir to incorporate it into the fat. (There's your roux!) Stir in a couple of cups of milk and bring it to a boil to thicken. Or, use canned broth instead of milk, and then finish with a couple of ounces of cream. Taste for salt and pepper. Done.

- Pork chops 'n' gravy (note the fancy title): Brown four chops in butter or oil, then remove to a warm plate. Whisk in a couple of teaspoons of Dijon mustard. Stir in a cup of canned broth, and bring to a boil. Thicken by dribbling in cornstarch (or flour) dissolved in cold liquid (called a "slurry") to your desired consistency. Remove from heat, whisk in a tablespoon of butter and taste for salt and pepper. Boom.

- Steak and mushroom gravy: Sear your steak in hot fat to your desired doneness, and remove to a warm plate. Add half a pound of sliced mushrooms, and saute until just done.

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Photo by SarahWest

Tomatillos are covered by a lantern-shaped husk.

TOMATILLOS

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The acidic resonance between tomatillos, a longtime staple, and limes, introduced (along with other citrus varieties) by Spanish conquistadors, may explain why these cuisines took to limes much more so than lemons.

Its flavor being familiar, they already knew what to do with it.

One pre-Columbian use of the tomatillo was to tenderize meat. Stewed with chiles and perhaps a handful of quelites — wild greens, such as purslane or amaranth leaves — tomatillo acidity softened lean cuts the way

citrus juices will. Remnants of this technique are evident in dishes like pork verde (pork braised in green salsa) or tomatillo-marinated skirt steaks. Tomatillos perform similar to (and likely predate the use of) lime juice in various salsas, invigorating avocado's heaviness in a well-balanced guacamole,

or kicking up the acidity of chile- and tomato-based salsas.

Although the temptation to toss tomatillo husks out the back door so they can tumble in the wind like balls of lace must have been irresistible even to the Mayans and Aztecs, they discovered arguably better uses. Water boiled with ten or so tomatillo husks somehow imparts masa with a fluffy lightness the way baking soda does in modern recipes. Many sources I found attribute this to the husk's acidity. Since the water-husk infusions often (but tellingly not always) cite the inclusion of a particular kind of alkaline mineral salt called tequesquite, the basic idea is that the salt and the husk react something like baking soda and vinegar.

In an interesting exchange I found between a Mexican food blogger and the scientist-author Harold McGee, McGee explains that the chemistry of this theory doesn't pan out. Prepared as an infusion, the gas release that results from the contact between the alkali and the acid would occur during the boiling process, meaning that the fluff-producing magic would extinguish long before it is added to the masa. McGee offers instead that their leavening power could be the result of pectin and other thickening agents released from the husk's rigid cell walls by boiling (with or without the alkaline salt). Their elasticity might soften the dense dough, allowing air bubbles to expand during cooking, lending the masa a fluffy lightness it would not otherwise have.

With no more than a high

school chemistry course under my belt, I have nothing to add, except another comment I came across a few times on various food discussion boards. Though I hesitate to call it a tradition without further evidence, it appears that several Mexican grandmothers have been known to boil tomatillo husks with cactus paddles in order to reduce the paddles' slime (something like okra's). Sounds like magic, but maybe the slime isn't disappearing, just thicken-

ing under the influence of pectin, in which case Harold might be on to something.

Though it seems like fall is not the season for tomatillos, they'll produce until the first killing frost, not needing the same heat or ripening time as tomatoes. Get them fresh and local while you still can, and the next time you take home those "little tomatoes," don't think tomato at all. Think lime flavor, lightness, and silky rich sauce, maybe even husk and all.

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