

Caramelized Onions



As I mention quite often, when cooking without the culinary crutches of excessive salt, fat, and sugar you need to employ some special strategies to get flavor in your food. Caramelized onions can supply that deeply satisfying savory or “umami” flavor characteristic that is common in rich foods usually containing meat or oil. Learning to caramelize onions without oil is an essential skill that you need to develop if you want to cook rich foods without meat, oil, and excessive salt, fat, sugar.

Start with a stainless steel pan with a nice heavy bottom. All-Clad is the industry standard for these style of pans, but they are quite expensive and there are many cheaper pans on the market that will do just fine. Many people suggest using cast iron, but I find it difficult to determine exactly when the onions brown and the seasoning on cast iron pans doesn't respond well to the deglazing we need to do. Get the pan hot and add just a tablespoon or two of water then cover the bottom of the pan with sliced onions. Don't overcrowd the pan.



Watching the pan vigilantly, allow the water to evaporate and what's called “fond” or that brown caramelized sugar from the onions to develop on the bottom of the pan as pictured above.



Deglaze the pan with the same very small amount of water you used at the start. Make sure that the water is releasing all of the fond from the bottom of the pan as pictured at left. Use a wooden spoon to coax it off the bottom of the pan if it is being difficult.

Be very careful not to burn the onions, just brown them. If you *do* burn them discard that batch, thoroughly clean the pan, and start over.



Now quickly stir the onions back into the deglazing water with all of the brown fond in it allowing it to color the onions. Not only are the onions developing that nice color we associate with sautéing, they are also retaining the rich caramelized flavor we want.

Repeat this process as many times as energy and time will allow. The darker the onions, the richer the flavor, and the more umami or savoriness the onions will impart.

On the last two or three deglazing stages spray on some Bragg's Aminos and allow that to cook into the onions.



It's hard to believe, but you can actually make a quite acceptable oil-free and meat-free French onion soup using this technique and dishes like the Middle Eastern French lentil and bulgur wheat classic called mujadara, the quintessential flavor profile of which is a healthy topping of richly caramelized onions, can also become a part of your cooking repertoire. With the addition of a rich vegetable stock or mushroom broth thickened with a flour slurry the finished onions pictured at left also yield a nice savory onion gravy!