

The Seductive Charms of Chopped Liver

However it appeared in Russia, it's part of the Russian pantry now.

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“What am I, chopped liver?”

Such a marvelous phrase with so many applications. Tyrion, our black lab bounds towards my husband nine times out of ten, even though I’m the one with a full pocket of treats.

“What I am I, Tyrion? Chopped liver?” I ask him.

It turns out that Tyrion actually loves chopped liver. Or something very similar: chicken liver pâté. I know, because the last time I made some I surreptitiously gave Tyrion a spoonful to lick in a shameless bid to become the alpha in his life. He licked the spoon clean, politely wagged his tail in appreciation, then trotted off to find my husband, leaving me once again feeling like, well, chopped liver.

The origin of this rueful phrase comes from the fact that chopped liver is an appetizer rather than a main course, as will be evident to anyone who has ever experienced an expansive Russian zakuska spread. Traditionally, chopped liver combines sauteed chicken livers with hard-boiled eggs and onions and either butter or chicken fat in a coarse grind, ideal for spreading on toast or crackers — the perfect appetite-whetter and highly effective blotting paper for a particularly potent cocktail or six.

But how many degrees of separation are there between chopped liver and liver pâté or “печёночный паштет?” And which came first? The French influence here is hard to ignore, which must make pâté the more venerable dish. The conduit is clearly the Ashkenazim, who brought French traditional goose liver dishes east, where chicken livers were more common. Cut with eggs and onions, chopped liver became popular throughout Eastern Europe, not only as a stand-alone dish but also as the filling for pastries and pies, still popular today.

The recipe that follows attempts to bridge the gap between pâté and паштет by combining sauteed chicken livers with mushrooms rather than eggs, but keeping the onions and adding lots of fresh thyme, a generous splash of Madeira, brandy, and a few non-traditional spices. This is an adaptation of a longtime family favorite, which appears throughout the year, from summer picnics to New Year’s Day brunches. Having a jar of this in the fridge is like having an ace in the hole: the perfect opening salvo for any kind of entertainment or, indeed, seduction. Even if it is only your black lab.

Ingredients

- 1¼ lb. (570 grams) chicken livers, trimmed of the sinewy connective tissue
- ⅔ lb. (300 grams) mushrooms, cleaned and trimmed
- 2 sticks (225 grams or 16 Tbsp) unsalted butter, divided
- 1 large shallot, finely minced
- 2 Tbsp fresh thyme plus more for garnishing
- ½ cup (120 ml) Madeira
- 2 Tbsp cognac
- 1 tsp mace
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- ½ tsp white pepper
- Salt to taste

Instructions

- Melt three quarters of a stick of butter (85 grams or 12 Tbsp) over medium heat in a large skillet. Add the shallots and sauté for 2 minutes. Then add the mushrooms and the liver with a large pinch of salt. Cook for 3–5 minutes until the liver turns a darker color.
- Add the liquids, mace, nutmeg, and white pepper, cover and cook on low heat for 10 minutes. Then add another three quarters of a stick of butter (85 grams or 12 Tbsp) and the fresh thyme. Process in a blender or food processor. The blender is the preferred machine here, but a food processor will suffice. However, if you like your pâté super smooth, take the extra step of passing the pate through a fine-mesh sieve while it is still hot. Pour the pâté into a non-reactive jar or bowl.
- Melt the remaining butter, then pour it over the surface of the pate and add additional

thyme sprigs.

- Refrigerate covered for at least 4 hours, but better overnight. Serve with toast points and briny pickles.

Recipe adapted from Nika Hazelton.

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