

KITCHEN EDITION • 2026

# THE SUPPER TABLE BIBLE

*Seven hundred and fifty pages of the suppers that fed this  
country, copied off the worn cards of a thousand recipe  
boxes.*



**OTIS GRANGER**

*wear is proof*

# 05

## Ground Beef I: The Stretchers

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In a garage outside Osceola, Nebraska, I opened a chest freezer that had been running on an extension cord for longer than anybody in the family could account for, and the whole bottom of it was one-pound packages. White butcher paper, folded the way a locker plant folds it, taped once, and on every single one the same three things in grease pencil: HAMB, the weight, and a month. Forty of them, maybe fifty. The daughter said her mother had bought a quarter of beef every fall for fifty years.

Here is the part I want you to notice. Not one of those packages was two pounds. Not one was a half. A whole beef came off that locker line in whatever weights the man wrapping it chose, and somebody had asked him, every year, for fifty years, to make them pounds. Because the pound was the unit. The pound was one supper. Every card in that woman's box was written against a pound of hamburger the way a carpenter's plans are written against a two by four, and she was not going to reorganize her whole cooking life around a package that came out at a pound and a quarter.

A pound of ground beef, cooked and drained, is about twelve ounces of meat. Feed six people off it and each one gets two ounces. Two ounces is nothing. It is a third of a hamburger. So the entire question these recipes exist to answer is: what goes in the pan with those two ounces so that the plate looks like supper and a person gets up from the table full. The answer has three forms, and once you see them you will see them everywhere in this book. **A starch that cooks in the pan and drinks the flavor**, which is rice, macaroni, potatoes, barley. **A vegetable with bulk and no cost**, which is cabbage, onion, celery, whatever the garden had too much of. **A crumb that holds water inside the meat**

**itself**, which is crackers, bread, oats, and which is really a trick for making twelve ounces of beef weigh sixteen.

That is a stretcher. The women who wrote these cards did not use the word and would not have liked it much. They would have said it goes further. This chapter is the six that go furthest, the ones whose cards come out of the box soft and brown and taped, and I am going to be straight with you the same way I am in every chapter: four of these are genuinely good and I would eat them this week, one is good and boring, and the whole category faded for a reason I can name. The reason is on almost every card here, and the tag is the same one over and over. **THE MONEY MOVED.** Ground beef stopped being the cheap thing. When you take away the reason to stretch a pound, the stretch goes, and the supper goes with it.

## The Arithmetic Of One Pound

Before the recipes, the numbers they were all written against, because the numbers are the argument.

| The stretcher              | Per 1 pound of beef                          | What it needs                                                 | What it does                                               | Costs about |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Long grain white rice, raw | 1 cup in a skillet, 1/2 cup inside meatballs | 2 cups of liquid per cup of rice, tight lid, 18 to 20 minutes | Doubles the pan and takes on the beef fat                  | 45 cents    |
| Elbow macaroni, dry        | 8 ounces, which is 2 cups                    | 2 to 2 1/2 cups of the liquid it cooks in                     | Thickens its own sauce if you cook it in the pot           | 65 cents    |
| Potatoes                   | 3 pounds, boiled and mashed                  | Milk, butter, salt                                            | Carries gravy. The cheapest bulk here                      | \$3.00      |
| Cabbage                    | 1 head, 2 to 2 1/2 pounds                    | Fat, salt, and real browning                                  | Turns half a pound of beef into supper for five            | \$2.50      |
| Cracker or bread crumbs    | 3/4 cup, soaked in 1/3 cup milk              | The soak, always                                              | Holds water inside the meat. Softer loaf, softer meatballs | 25 cents    |
| Rolled oats                | 1/2 cup, soaked the same way                 | The soak                                                      | Same job as crumbs, chewier, and free if you eat oatmeal   | 15 cents    |
| Canned beans               | 1 to 2 cans, drained                         | Rinsing, or the pot tastes of the can                         | Protein for a fraction. The chili trick                    | \$1.20      |

Now put that against the meat. As I write this, ground beef in this country is running right around \$6.89 a pound, which is the highest it has ever been in plain dollars. In the spring of 1972 it was about 69 cents. That is the whole story of this chapter in two numbers, and it works in a direction most people get backwards, so let me say it plainly.

In 1972 the stretcher was a real share of the cost of supper. A cup of rice and a pound of beef were closer together in price than you would think, and every one of those cards was an act of arithmetic. Today the stretcher is a rounding error. Rice at 45 cents next to beef at \$6.89 is not a savings strategy, it is noise. **What the stretcher saves you now is not pennies on the rice. It is pounds of beef.** Six people fed off one pound instead of two and a quarter is the better part of ten dollars, on a Tuesday, off a recipe that takes half an hour. The math got better, not worse. Nobody noticed because they quit doing it for other reasons.

One more piece of arithmetic, and it comes straight out of that chest freezer in Osceola. The family pack at the meat counter runs a dollar or so a pound under the small tray, sometimes more when it is marked down late in the day, and the only reason people do not buy it is that they do not want three pounds of hamburger sitting in the refrigerator. So do what she did. Get it home, divide it into one-pound portions right on the counter, flatten each one into a square about three quarters of an inch thick inside a freezer bag, press the air out, label it with the date, and stack them flat. Flat packages freeze fast, stack like books, and thaw in the refrigerator overnight instead of over two days. Raw ground beef keeps one to two days in the refrigerator and about four months frozen before the fat starts tasting stale, and it should thaw in the refrigerator or not at all. She was not being thrifty in some abstract way. She had turned a quarter of a beef into fifty suppers, in advance, and every one of them was already portioned to a card.

## How To Brown A Pound Of Ground Beef

Every recipe in this chapter and the next starts with this, and most people do it wrong in the same two ways. It is worth six hundred words once so I never have to write it again.

**Buy the right grind.** The number on the package is the lean to fat ratio, and it matters more here than anywhere else in the book.

| The package says                | What it really is                   | You pour off, per pound | Use it for                                                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 73/27, or just "ground beef"    | The cheapest grind, mixed trimmings | 4 to 5 tablespoons      | Anything you drain hard: goulash, chili, tacos                     |
| 80/20, or "ground chuck"        | The default of this whole book      | 2 to 4 tablespoons      | Everything in this chapter. Gravy, meatballs, skilletts            |
| 85/15, or "ground round"        | Leaner, still workable              | 1 to 2 tablespoons      | Casseroles where fat pools on top                                  |
| 90/10 or 93/7, "ground sirloin" | Lean and dry                        | Almost nothing          | Not this chapter. Dry meatballs, and gravy with no fat to build on |

Buy 80/20 and mean it. The fat is not a flaw you are tolerating, it is an ingredient you are going to cook in. The gravy recipe below is built on it directly.

**Get the pan hot first.** Medium high, and give a heavy skillet or a cast iron pan its full five minutes. Meat dropped into a cool pan sits in its own juice and turns gray, and gray meat has no flavor, because browning is where the flavor of cooked beef comes from and browning cannot happen until the water is gone.

**Do not crowd it.** One pound in a 10 inch skillet is right. One pound in an 8 inch skillet steams. Two pounds in a 10 inch skillet steams. If you are cooking two pounds, do it in two batches or use a 12 inch pan, and the pan conversion table in the tools chapter tells you which of your pans is which.

**Leave it alone at the start.** Break the pound into four or five chunks, press them flat, and do not touch them for three minutes. Let one side get brown. Then break it up. If you stand there stirring and chopping from the first second, you will get a pan of small gray crumbs in a pool

of liquid, which is what most people think browned hamburger looks like, and it is not.

**How small to break it** depends on the dish, and the cards are consistent about this. Gravy and sauces want it fine, broken with the edge of a spoon into crumbs, because it has to distribute through a liquid. Skillet suppers and goulash want it in bigger pieces, because you want to find beef when you eat it.

**Salt at the end, not the start.** Salt pulls water out of the meat, and water in the pan is the enemy of browning. Salt it once it is brown.

**Drain, or do not, on purpose.** Tip the pan and spoon the fat off into a can, not down the sink, where it will harden in the trap. How much to leave depends on what comes next. If flour is going in to make gravy, leave 3 to 4 tablespoons, because that fat is half the roux. If tomato and pasta are going in, leave a tablespoon and pour the rest off, because tomato and beef fat separate and float. That is the whole rule.

**And the one safety line.** Ground beef is safe at 160 degrees, all the way through, which for crumbled meat means no pink left and for a meatball or a patty means a thermometer. Whole muscle beef can be pink in the middle because bacteria live on the outside surface. Ground beef mixes that surface all the way through, which is the entire reason the number is different. That is the only time I will say it in these two chapters.

## Hamburger Gravy Over Mashed Potatoes

If I had to point at one card and say this is the one, it would be this one. It has four names across the boxes I have carried out, which is more than any other dish in this book, and in the boxes that have it, it is almost always the softest card in there. Brown, translucent at the corners, and in one Wisconsin box, torn in half at the fold and mended with tape twice. We had it Thursdays. I did not understand until I was a grown man that it was a poor family's supper, because it did not taste like one.

## The card says

*Serves 6. About 45 minutes, and most of that is the potatoes.*

## Ingredients

For the potatoes:

- 3 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and cut in even 2 inch chunks
- 1 tablespoon salt for the water
- 1 cup whole milk, warmed
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 teaspoon salt, more to taste

For the gravy:

- 1 pound ground beef, 80/20
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine (optional, and about half the cards leave it out)
- 1/4 cup all purpose flour
- 3 cups whole milk
- 1 1/4 teaspoons salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper, and then more, enough that you can see it

## Method

1. Start the potatoes in **cold** salted water, bring to a boil, then simmer 15 to 20 minutes until a knife slides off a chunk without being helped. Cold start matters. Potatoes dropped into boiling water cook the outside to mush before the middle is done.
2. Drain them, then put them back in the hot empty pot over the burner for 30 seconds and shake it. Dry potato drinks butter. Wet potato makes wet potatoes.
3. Mash, then work in the warm milk and the butter and salt. Warm the milk in the microwave or in the gravy pan. Cold milk cools the

- potatoes, and cold potatoes need more mashing, and more mashing is what turns them to glue. Never a mixer, never a food processor.
4. Meanwhile, brown the beef in a 10 or 12 inch skillet over medium high, breaking it fine once one side has color. Add the onion for the last 4 minutes.
  5. **Do not drain it unless it is swimming.** You want 3 to 4 tablespoons of fat in that pan. If there is more, spoon it off down to that. This is the step people get wrong, and it is not a matter of taste, it is arithmetic: the flour needs fat to go into, and without enough fat you are making paste.
  6. Sprinkle the flour over everything and stir it for 1 to 2 minutes, until the pan looks pasty and it smells toasted rather than raw. Raw flour tastes like raw flour and no amount of simmering later fixes it as well as this minute does.
  7. Pour in the milk about a cup at a time, stirring hard after each addition until it is smooth before the next one goes in. The first cup makes a thick smooth paste. That paste is what keeps the rest lump free.
  8. Bring it to a simmer and cook 5 to 8 minutes, stirring, until it coats the back of a spoon and a finger drawn through leaves a line. Salt and pepper, and taste it. This dish takes more black pepper than you think it does.
  9. Serve it over the potatoes, loose. It tightens on the plate.

### **If it went wrong**

Lumps mean the milk went in too fast, and you can save it by pouring the whole thing through a strainer and pressing. A floury or chalky taste means step 6 got skipped or rushed. Thin gravy just needs a few more minutes of simmer, and thick gravy needs a splash of milk, and remember that it thickens as it cools, so pull it a shade looser than you want. Greasy gravy means too much fat was left in the pan. And if it tastes like nothing at all, it is under salted, which is the most common failure of this dish by a wide margin. It is milk and flour and beef. It needs seasoning the way a potato needs it.

### Otis's note

**THE MONEY MOVED**, plainly. That skillet fed six off one pound and the potatoes did the rest, and once beef stops being cheap the whole structure has no purpose. Here is the cross-box part. I have this card under four names: hamburger gravy, creamed hamburger, poor man's stroganoff, and in two Nebraska boxes, goulash, which is a fight for the next section. Same card. Same ratio, near enough, every time. When a dish shows up under four names in five states, that is not a recipe traveling. That is a lot of women independently discovering the same answer to the same question. Today it costs about \$11.50 for six people, call it \$1.90 a plate. Make this tonight.

## Goulash, The Midwest Kind

This is the one pot version, and in my part of the country everybody called it goulash, which would offend a Hungarian and did not trouble anybody in Iowa. Beef browned with onion, macaroni cooked right in the tomato, one pot, one hour, feeds a table. The cards for it are usually short, usually undated, and usually stained across the middle where the card lay on the counter while the pot went.

### The card says

*Serves 6 to 8. About 40 minutes.*

### Ingredients

- 1 pound ground beef, 80/20
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 green pepper, chopped (optional, and see the tally below)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 can (28 ounces) diced tomatoes, with the juice
- 1 can (8 ounces) tomato sauce
- 1 cup water or beef broth
- 2 cups (8 ounces) dry elbow macaroni

- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar, only if the tomatoes taste sharp
- 1 cup shredded cheddar, optional, on top

## Method

1. Brown the beef with the onion and green pepper in a heavy pot, 8 to 10 minutes. Pour off the fat down to about a tablespoon. Beef fat and tomato do not combine, they separate, and a greasy orange slick on top is the result of skipping this.
2. Garlic in for 30 seconds. Any longer over that heat and it turns bitter.
3. Add the tomatoes, tomato sauce, water, Worcestershire, salt, pepper, paprika, bay leaf and the sugar if you need it. Simmer 10 minutes uncovered. **Taste it now and fix it now.** The sauce has to taste finished before the macaroni goes in, because 8 ounces of pasta will absorb a great deal of liquid and dilute everything it does not absorb.
4. Stir in the dry macaroni. Cover, drop the heat to low, and simmer 12 to 15 minutes, stirring every 3 or 4 minutes and scraping the bottom. Cooking the macaroni in the tomato instead of a separate pot of water is the entire trick of this dish: the starch coming off the pasta thickens the sauce, and the pasta takes on the beef and the tomato instead of plain water.
5. Pull it off the heat while the macaroni still has some bite. Lid on, 5 minutes. It keeps cooking in the pot and it will be exactly right when you get the table set.
6. Cheese over the top if that is how your mother did it. About half the cards say so.

## If it went wrong

Mushy pasta means it went the full time and then sat. Pull it two minutes short next time and let the rest happen off the heat. A scorched bottom means the heat was too high or the pot was thin, and you must stir it, because dry pasta sinks and sticks. Too tight and dry means the macaroni drank more than the pot had, so add hot water half a cup at a time. Too soupy, take the lid off and simmer 5 minutes. And if it tastes flat and tinny, that is under-salted canned tomato, which wants salt, a pinch of sugar, and the ten minutes of simmering in step 3 that you skipped.

### **Otis's note**

**THE MONEY MOVED.** The macaroni is the stretcher and that is all the macaroni ever was. What is worth saying is how completely this dish belongs to the pot rather than to any recipe. There are cards for it that give no quantities at all, just a list, because the woman writing it out for her niece knew perfectly well that the niece was going to use whatever size can of tomatoes was on the shelf. About \$11.85 for seven servings, call it \$1.70 a plate.

## **American Chop Suey**

Now the New England card for what looks like the same supper and is not quite. This one turns up in the boxes from the eastern side of my territory and in boxes that came west with somebody, and you can spot it three ways: the macaroni is boiled separately, there is oregano in it, and there is a spoon of tomato paste. It is a slightly better dish than the goulash and it costs you a second pot.

### **The card says**

*Serves 6 to 8. About 45 minutes.*

### **Ingredients**

- 8 ounces (2 cups) dry elbow macaroni
- 1 pound ground beef, 80/20
- 1 large onion, chopped

- 1 green pepper, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 can (28 ounces) crushed tomatoes
- 1/2 cup water or beef broth
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- Grated parmesan at the table

## Method

1. Boil the macaroni in well salted water, one full minute short of what the box says. Drain it and **do not rinse it**. It finishes in the sauce, and the starch clinging to it is what makes the sauce hold on instead of sliding off. Salt that water like soup; it is the only chance the pasta itself gets to be seasoned.
2. Brown the beef with the onion and pepper. Pour off the fat down to a tablespoon.
3. Add the garlic and the tomato paste and cook, stirring, for a full 2 minutes, until the paste darkens from bright red to brick. This is the step that separates this dish from the goulash. Frying the paste cooks the raw tinny taste out of it and builds a base, and it is the biggest single improvement anybody can make to a sauce out of a can.
4. Add the crushed tomatoes, water, oregano, basil, salt, pepper, sugar and Worcestershire. Simmer **uncovered** 20 to 25 minutes, until it thickens and stops tasting like a can. Uncovered is deliberate. You are cooking water out.

5. Fold in the drained macaroni and cook 3 to 5 minutes more so the pasta finishes in the sauce and takes some on. If it goes tight, loosen it with a little of the pasta water.
6. Parmesan at the table, not in the pot.

### **If it went wrong**

Soupy at the end means the sauce did not get its full uncovered simmer before the pasta went in, and adding pasta will not fix it. Blown out pasta means the full box time plus the time in the sauce, which is too much. Sharp and acidic means the paste never got fried and the simmer was short. And bland almost always traces back to unsalted pasta water.

### **Otis's note**

**THE MONEY MOVED**, same as its cousin. Which is better? The chop suey, honestly, because frying the paste and simmering the sauce uncovered gets you something with depth to it, and the goulash is one note. Which would I make on a Tuesday? The goulash, because it is one pot and there is nothing to drain, and on a Tuesday that decides it. That trade is most of what separates the good cards from the worn ones. The worn card is rarely the best recipe in the box. It is the best recipe that fit the afternoon.

## **Goulash Or Chop Suey: What The Cards Actually Say**

Since I have been carrying both of these out of houses for forty years, I went through the ones I keep copies of and sorted them, and the split is cleaner than I expected. This is my own count and nobody else's, and it is not a survey of America, it is a survey of what came out of the boxes I was standing in front of.

| What the card does | The Midwest goulash card                       | The New England chop suey card                |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Cooks the macaroni | In the tomato, in the same pot                 | Separately, in salted water                   |
| Tomato             | Canned diced plus sauce, sometimes tomato soup | Crushed tomatoes plus a spoon of paste, fried |
| Green pepper       | Fewer than half                                | Nearly every one                              |
| Herbs              | Paprika, or nothing at all                     | Oregano, sometimes basil                      |
| Cheese             | Cheddar over the top, about half               | Parmesan at the table                         |
| What it is called  | Goulash, hotdish, beef and macaroni            | American chop suey, sometimes just chop suey  |
| Pots to wash       | One                                            | Two                                           |

The useful conclusion is not which one is authentic. It is this: **whenever a card gives you a choice between one pot and two, the one-pot version is the one that got made.** That pattern holds across this entire book. The dish that survived in a working kitchen is almost never the better dish. It is the dish with fewer pans in the sink at 6:15.

## The Hamburger And Rice Skillet

The plainest supper in the chapter and the cheapest of the ones using a full pound. Beef, onion, rice, broth, lid on, twenty minutes. Rice was the cheapest stretcher on the shelf, cheaper than macaroni, and this card is in more boxes than the goulash is. It is also the one that goes wrong most often, and it goes wrong for exactly one reason, which is that people guess at the liquid.

### The card says

*Serves 6. About 40 minutes, 30 of them hands off.*

### Ingredients

- 1 pound ground beef, 80/20
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 ribs celery, chopped (optional, and worth it)
- 1 cup long grain white rice, uncooked
- 2 1/4 cups beef broth, or water with 2 bouillon cubes
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon salt, less if the broth is already salted
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 cup frozen peas, optional

## Method

1. Brown the beef in a 10 or 12 inch skillet that has a tight lid. Add the onion and celery for the last 4 minutes. Pour off the fat down to about 2 tablespoons. You need some, and a pool of it makes greasy rice.
2. Add the rice and stir it in the fat for 2 to 3 minutes, until the grains look chalky and smell toasted. This is not optional and it is not a flourish. Fat coats each grain and firms its surface, and the grains go into the liquid as separate things and come out as separate things. Skip it and the pan goes gummy.
3. Pour in the broth, Worcestershire, salt and pepper. Bring it to a boil and stir **one time** to level everything out.
4. Lid on, heat as low as it goes, 18 to 20 minutes. Do not lift the lid and do not stir. Stirring rubs starch loose into the liquid, and every peek dumps the steam that is cooking the top layer.
5. Off the heat, lid still on, 10 minutes. If you are using peas, scatter them over the top when you take it off the burner and let the rest of the steam do them.
6. Fork it apart, do not stir it, and taste for salt.

**About the liquid, since this is the whole recipe.** The standard is 2 cups of liquid to 1 cup of long grain white rice. A wide skillet with a loose lid loses steam, which is why the card above says 2 1/4. If your lid seals

tight and the rice comes out soft at 18 minutes, drop back to 2 cups next time and it will be perfect. **To make the tomato version**, add a 14.5 ounce can of diced tomatoes with the juice and cut the broth back to 3/4 cup. That keeps the total liquid the same, which is the only thing that matters.

### **If it went wrong**

Crunchy rice means the heat was too high, the lid was loose, or you were short on liquid. Add 1/4 cup of hot water, put the lid back, 5 more minutes. Soupy rice cannot be fixed at the end, which is why you measure at the start. Gummy means somebody stirred. A scorched bottom means the burner was not actually on low or the pan is thin, and a thin pan will do this every time no matter how careful you are.

### **Otis's note**

**THE MONEY MOVED.** General Mills read the same situation these women were in and put Hamburger Helper into stores nationally in 1971, and it sold on the first try, because it is this recipe with the measuring done for you. What you are buying in that box is pasta and a packet of seasoned powder, and what it saves you is the two minutes of measuring in step 3. Make it from the skillet and it costs about \$9.25 for six, a little over \$1.50 a plate, and you get to decide how much salt is in it. That last part is not a small thing.

## **Beef And Cabbage Skillet**

Half a pound of beef and a two dollar cabbage, and it feeds five people. This is the most extreme stretch in the chapter and it does not taste like it, which is the whole reason it earned a place in the boxes. The cards for it are usually in the German and Bohemian houses up here, often with caraway seed written in at the bottom in different ink, as though it were an argument somebody won later.

### **The card says**

*Serves 4 to 6. About 35 minutes.*

## Ingredients

- 1/2 to 1 pound ground beef, 80/20 (a half pound is the honest original, a full pound is what people do now)
- 1 medium head green cabbage, 2 to 2 1/2 pounds
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 1 teaspoon salt, more to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon caraway seed, optional
- 1/2 cup water or beef broth
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar
- 1 can (14.5 ounces) diced tomatoes, optional, and a common variant

## Method

1. Quarter the cabbage and cut out the hard core. Then either cut it across into 1 inch ribbons, or leave the quarters as wedges. Both are on the cards. Wedges brown better and look better on the plate. Ribbons cook faster and mix through the beef. Pick one.
2. Brown the beef in a 12 inch skillet, then push it to one side or lift it out onto a plate. Leave all the fat in the pan. The fat is the cooking medium for the cabbage and it is most of the flavor of this dish.
3. Lay the cabbage in the drippings, cut faces down, in as close to one layer as you can manage. **Now do not touch it for 4 to 5 minutes.** You want the cut faces to go brown and sweet. If you stand there stirring it, you are boiling it in its own water, and boiled cabbage is what gave cabbage its bad name in this country.
4. Add the onion and the salt, stir once, and give it another 3 or 4 minutes.
5. Beef back in, water in, lid on, 8 to 12 minutes, until the cabbage is tender but still has some body to it. If you are using tomatoes, they go in here instead of the water.
6. Off the heat, stir in the vinegar, then taste for salt. The vinegar is not a garnish. Cabbage and beef fat are both soft and sweet, and

without an acid the whole pan tastes heavy and unfinished.

### **If it went wrong**

Watery means too much liquid or too long under the lid, and the fix is to take the lid off and cook it down. If your kitchen smelled strong, the cabbage was overcooked, because the sulfur smell people associate with cabbage builds the longer it cooks. Shorter and hotter is the answer, not longer and gentler. Bland means you left out the vinegar, the salt, or both. Greasy means a full pound of 80/20 with nothing poured off, so pour some off.

### **Otis's note**

Tag it **THE MONEY MOVED**, and then make an exception, because this is the one dish in the chapter whose economics still work perfectly. Cabbage is still about a dollar a pound. Beef went up ten times over and cabbage did not, so the recipe that leans hardest on the cabbage is the one that survived the change best. Half a pound of beef, a cabbage, an onion, and you have fed five people for about \$6.65, which is \$1.33 a plate and the cheapest supper in this chapter by a good margin. That is not a history lesson. That is Thursday.

## **Porcupine Meatballs**

Raw white rice worked into the meat, rolled up, simmered in tomato until the grains swell and push out through the surface like quills, which is where the name comes from and it is a fair description. Children in my generation were told what they were called before they were told what was in them, and it worked. This card turns up in more boxes than any other meatball in this book, and it is worn in about half of them, which is a high rate for something that takes an hour.

### **The card says**

*Serves 4 to 6, makes about 16 meatballs. About 1 hour 15 minutes.*

### **Ingredients**

For the meatballs:

- 1 pound ground beef, 80/20
- 1/2 cup long grain white rice, uncooked
- 1 small onion, grated on the big holes of a box grater
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup water or milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder, optional

For the sauce:

- 1 can (15 ounces) tomato sauce
- 1 1/4 cups water
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

*(The card version of the sauce is one can of condensed tomato soup plus one soup can of water, and that is what most of these boxes actually used. It works, it is sweeter, and the from-scratch sauce above is the better of the two.)*

## Method

1. Mix the beef, raw rice, grated onion, egg, water, salt and pepper with a fork or your fingertips until it is just combined and no further. Grate the onion rather than chopping it, because chopped pieces sit in the meat like little wedges and split the balls open as they cook. And stop mixing early. Worked meat goes tight and bounces.
2. Roll 16 balls, about 1 1/2 inches, and roll them loose. A meatball squeezed hard cooks up like a rubber ball.
3. You may brown them in a little oil in a wide skillet, turning once or twice, or you may skip it. Browning adds flavor. Most of the cards

skip it, and they are not wrong, because these are going to spend an hour under sauce.

4. Mix the sauce ingredients and pour over. The liquid should come at least halfway up the meatballs. This is the step everything depends on, so look at the pan and add water if it does not.
5. Bring it to a bare simmer, cover tight, and cook on **low** for 45 to 50 minutes, turning the meatballs once at the halfway mark. Or put them in a covered dish in a 350 degree oven for 1 hour.
6. They are done when the rice grains have swelled, pushed out through the meat, and are tender all the way through, and the meat reads 160 degrees. If the sauce tightens up before then, add a quarter cup of water and put the lid back.

### **If it went wrong**

Crunchy rice is the failure of this dish and it happens for three reasons: not enough thin liquid, a lid that did not seal, or heat high enough that the sauce cooked away before the rice was done. That raw rice needs both a full 45 minutes and something to drink. If you find crunch at 45 minutes, add water, cover, and give it 15 more, and it will come right. Meatballs that fell apart were boiled too hard, or the mix had too much liquid in it. Tough bouncy meatballs were mixed too long or packed too tight. A scorched pan means the heat was above a bare simmer.

### **Otis's note**

**THE MONEY MOVED**, and this one shows the machinery of it more plainly than anything else in the chapter. That rice is not a filler and it is not a texture. It is the second half of the meal, cooked inside the first half. Half a cup of rice adds most of a cup of cooked starch to a pound of meat and it costs a quarter. The whole pan runs under nine dollars and feeds five. And once beef is the expensive item on the plate rather than the cheap one, the trick stops paying for itself, and you get what we have now, which is a country where almost nobody under fifty has eaten one of these.

## The Hamburger Soup Pointer

The furthest a pound will go is soup, where one pound of beef becomes a gallon of supper and the gallon eats twice. The recipe belongs to the soup chapter and that is where it is written out. But it belongs in the argument here, so take two things away from it now.

First, the stretchers in a hamburger soup are potatoes, carrots, onion, celery, and barley, and the barley is the one people forget. A half cup of pearl barley will thicken and fill a whole pot and costs almost nothing, and it is the reason a soup that started with one pound of meat can feed eight people and still feel like something.

Second, and this is the part I would tattoo on somebody: **the pot needs an acid.** A can of tomatoes, a spoon of tomato paste, a splash of vinegar at the end. Beef and root vegetables in plain broth is a flat, dull thing that tastes like the smell of a school hallway, and every dull pot of hamburger soup I have ever been served was missing exactly that. The soup chapter says it again at more length, and it is worth hearing twice.

## What Reheats And What Does Not

These suppers were made in quantity on purpose, and half of what made them worth the trouble was that Monday's pan was Tuesday's lunch. But they do not all come back the same, and knowing which is which will save you throwing food away.

**Better the second day:** the beef and cabbage, and it is not close. Cabbage keeps softening and sweetening overnight and the vinegar settles in. The goulash and the chop suey are also better, once the pasta finishes drinking the sauce, provided you accept that the pasta will be soft. That is the trade and it is worth making.

**Reheats fine with one adjustment:** the rice skillet, which comes back exactly right if you sprinkle a tablespoon of water over it, cover it, and heat it through. Dry reheated rice is a moisture problem and nothing else. The porcupine meatballs the same way, in their sauce, gently, with a splash of water in the pan.

**Reheats poorly:** the hamburger gravy, and this is the only one I would not plan on. Milk gravy thickens hard in the refrigerator and then breaks when you push it too fast over heat. It can be done, on low, with a whisk and a good splash of milk, but the mashed potatoes underneath it will be worse no matter what you do. Make the gravy for the number of people at the table.

**Freezing.** The goulash, the chop suey and the meatballs all freeze well, up to three months, and the meatballs freeze best of anything in this chapter. Freeze them in their sauce, thaw in the refrigerator, reheat covered. Do not freeze the rice skillet if you can help it, because thawed rice goes chalky. Do not freeze mashed potatoes at all.

**And the plain part.** Get leftovers into the refrigerator within two hours of the pan coming off the stove, in a shallow container so they cool fast, and eat them within three or four days. A deep covered pot of hot goulash set in the refrigerator can sit warm in the middle for hours, which is the one that catches people. Reheat to steaming all the way through, once. These kitchens routinely left the pot on the stove overnight and I ate plenty of it, and I am not going to pretend that was fine just because I survived it.

## What These Cost Tonight

Prices move and these are what I paid this month at an ordinary grocery in a town of nine thousand people, rounded, with beef at \$6.89 a pound.

| The supper                                         | Feeds | Cost of the pan      | Per plate |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------|-----------|
| Beef and cabbage skillet, half pound of beef       | 5     | \$6.65               | \$1.33    |
| Hamburger and rice skillet                         | 6     | \$9.25               | \$1.54    |
| Porcupine meatballs                                | 5     | \$8.90               | \$1.78    |
| Goulash                                            | 7     | \$11.85              | \$1.69    |
| American chop suey                                 | 7     | \$12.40              | \$1.77    |
| Hamburger gravy and mashed potatoes                | 6     | \$11.50              | \$1.90    |
| For comparison: 6 hamburger patties, 6 ounces each | 6     | \$15.50, before buns | \$2.58    |

That last line is the argument of the whole chapter, and I want to be careful about how I make it, because it is not the argument these dishes were invented to make. In 1972 the point was that a family could not afford the patties at all. Today most families reading this could. The point now is that the stretched pan feeds the same six people for about eleven dollars less, tastes better than a plain patty, makes leftovers that reheats, and takes half an hour. Those are the reasons to cook it, and they are honest reasons, and they have nothing to do with what year it is.

## What I Actually Think Of These Six

I said in the front of this book that I would tell you which ones to make and which ones to leave in the box, and that I would not sell you the idea that everything old was good. So here it is on these six, and it is a better report than most chapters will get.

Make the hamburger gravy this week. Make the beef and cabbage this week too, and make it with the full head of cabbage and the vinegar, and do not stir it early. Those two are good on their merits and would be good if they had been invented last year.

The goulash and the chop suey are both solid weeknight food and the chop suey is the better of the two if you have the second pot in you. The rice skillet is honest and dull and it is the one I would hand to somebody who has never cooked, because there is almost nothing in it to get wrong once you have measured the liquid.

The porcupine meatballs I would make for children and for anybody who likes a thing that is a little bit of a trick, and I would make the tomato soup version, because the card version is what everybody remembers and the sweetness is part of what they remember.

Not one of these six is in the category I would tell you to leave in the box. That is not true of every chapter and it will not be true of the next one, which is the ground beef the women cooked when the point was to please the table rather than to make the pound go around. Some of those are better than anything here. One or two of them should have stayed gone.