

# Punxsutawney Phil: The Groundhog and The Legend

By Melissa D. Fetterman

Imagine how confusing all this talk about Punxsutawney Phil would be to someone who'd never heard of him. Although most everybody nowadays seems to know who Phil is, let's take a crack at explaining him, just in case.

First, it's understandable how you might easily be misled when you hear folks talking about Punxsutawney Phil. People say things like, "So - what did Phil say? Are we going to have an early spring this year?" and "Did you see Phil on television yesterday?" You might wonder, who is this Punxsutawney Phil guy? Is he some kind of reporter?

Actually, Punxsy Phil is a reporter of sorts. He forecasts the weather. But he is, of course, unlike any other weather forecaster you've ever seen - and believe me, he never went to meteorology school. What sets Phil apart? First, he only makes one forecast per year; second, he's been doing it for more than a century; and third...he's covered with fur. I don't mean he's a guy with a hairy neck, arms, or back. Phil is a rodent - literally.

Punxsy Phil is a groundhog, and he lives in the town's library. Every February 2nd, this poor rodent is awakened from his peaceful slumber in the wee hours of the morning and taken to his cottage in the woods, at a place near Punxsutawney called Gobbler's Knob, to perform one extraordinary feat.

At Gobbler's Knob, Phil and the crowd await the dawn. Groundhog Club President Bill Cooper knocks thrice at the door of Phil's humble abode. Phil answers the door and accompanies his visitors out into the cold to greet the day. Bill Deeley, a lifetime member of the Groundhog Club and Phil's official handler, resplendent in top hat and tails, escorts the wise groundhog outside.

And then, Phil does what only Phil can do. He looks around, sniffs the wind and ponders the morning for a moment. He whispers in the ear of Bill Cooper, giving the man his glorious pronouncement in groundhogese. Cooper then translates the forecast for the entire world. Yes, Punxsutawney Phil, the Great Seer of Seers, weather prognosticator extraordinaire, tells us whether the cold, cold winter will come to a premature end, or whether it will last another six weeks.



Original Artwork by:  
David Learn

So how did Phil get this job, you ask?

To get to the roots of the Punxsy Phil legend, we need to journey back through time, to when Punxsutawney wasn't yet a town, a time before Europeans had even settled in what is now western Pennsylvania.

On what was known as the Shamokin path, halfway between the Allegheny and Susquehanna rivers, there was a campsite sometimes inhabited by the Delaware Indians. The area was polluted with sandflies, so the Delawares referred to it as *Ponksaduteney*, which literally means "the town of the sandflies." The name would eventually evolve into Punxsutawney.

The Delaware Indians' creation myth also plays an important part in our story. It goes something like this: The Lenni Lenape, or original people, began life as animals in Mother Earth, and emerged from Mother Earth later as human beings. Legend has it that the groundhog was recognized as the "grandfather" of the area's original inhabitants.

The rest of our story doesn't come about until later, when the first German settlers arrived in the area. They brought with them a legend surrounding Candlemas Day. The legend began in Great Britain, where we find several different poetic references to it. An old Scottish couplet, for example, says that *if Candlemas Day is bright and clear, there'll be twa (two) winters in the year*. The "two winters" refers to an additional six weeks of winter weather.

When the conquering Romans marched through that part of the

world, they picked up the legend, spreading it far and wide as they traveled onward. It eventually reached the Teutons (Germans). They decided that the hedgehog was a highly intelligent animal and that if he ventured outside on February 2, he would be able to correctly interpret the signs. If the winter sun was shining and the wise hedgehog saw his shadow, he would know the foul weather was not yet over, and would scurry back to his burrow to wait it out in comfort.

Eventually the Germans settled in what is now western Pennsylvania, bringing the legend with them. They saw no hedgehogs around, but they did see plenty of groundhogs, and they may have heard the ancient Delaware Indian myth surrounding the critters. So they decided that the groundhog was the only animal in the new land intelligent enough to foretell the weather each February 2.

Records show that in the early 1880s, these settlers started the tradition of trekking out into the woods on February 2 to track down the elusive Punxsutawney groundhog, now deemed the only true weather prognosticator. They set up their weather headquarters at Gobbler's Knob. In 1886, the editor of the *Punxsutawney Spirit*, the then-weekly local newspaper, referred to the trekkers as the Groundhog Club, laying the groundwork for the lasting stardom of the Punxsutawney Groundhog.

It was the club's leader, Clymer H. Freas, who proclaimed the Punxsutawney Groundhog the Great Seer of Seers of Gobbler's Knob. All other animals were denounced as imposters, since they apparently weren't intelligent enough to correctly interpret the signs and predict the weather. The first official trek to Gobbler's Knob was in 1887, with the resulting first official forecast from the Groundhog to the good citizens of Punxsutawney.

Through the years the legend has persisted, and Phil's fame has grown. Phil has been granted an audience with many of society's notables, including former President Ronald Reagan, in 1986; Governor Dick Thornburg, in 1987; and philanthropist/talk show star Oprah Winfrey, in 1995, to name a few. Tens of thousands of people now flock to the woods outside Punxsutawney each year to witness firsthand Phil's remarkable predictions.

So famous is he that *Groundhog Day*, a 1993 movie starring Bill Murray, was made in his honor. The movie has been seen around the world, and has served to further increase Phil's fame and add numbers to the throng who visit the Knob each February 2. Bill Deeley, Phil's official handler, says 18,000 to 20,000 people are expected this year!

And fame certainly has its perks. In 1974, Phil was awarded a luxury condo in the new municipal building. The condo is a temperature-controlled facility, replete with burrows, an imitation tree or two, and a deluxe bath (a shallow man-made stream which runs from one end of the apartment to the other). It has two enormous arch-shaped windows, one of which overlooks the town square; the other peers into the children's section of the library. In his comfortable quarters, Phil, his wife, Phyllis, and his house guests (usually cousins who need a place to stay while visiting Punxsutawney) are treated to straw, fresh greens and other foods fit for the reigning monarch of the rodent world.

Many events are held throughout the year in honor of Phil's unusual gift for prognostication. The second weekend of September is reserved for the annual Groundhog Hunt and Outing, a celebration for Punxsutawneyites which Phil fans everywhere are welcome to attend. The event began in 1887 as an actual groundhog hunt and barbecue, but somewhere along the line, people came to realize that this was not a very respectful way of honoring Phil. They no longer roast his kinfolk, having opted for fried steak in lieu of woodchuck, and since Phil is a magnanimous and forgiving fellow, he joins in the celebration, even sharing in a toast.

Legend has it that, for each gulp of punch he drinks, Phil gains another seven years' longevity. This explains his advanced years - more than a century old, and still going strong! Perhaps Phil isn't surprised, though - for surely he could have predicted it.

*With special thanks to Bill Deeley for his kind cooperation and participation in the creation of this article.*

# A Groundhog Day-aholic From Day One

By Alan Freed

I admit it. I'm a Groundhog Day-aholic. I'm sure that in these days of 12-step programs and support groups, I could seek help, but I'm not sure I want to. After all, this is an addiction that started practically from birth - I grew up in a home where it was hard to swing my arm without knocking over an item with Punxsutawney Phil's likeness on it.

My mom, Judy Freed, has been a longtime supporter of Punxsutawney Phil, and more specifically, Punxsutawney itself. She spent many years as an organizer of the annual summer Groundhog Festival celebration. Her involvement began in 1974, long before the lights of Hollywood helped promote Phil as an international sensation.

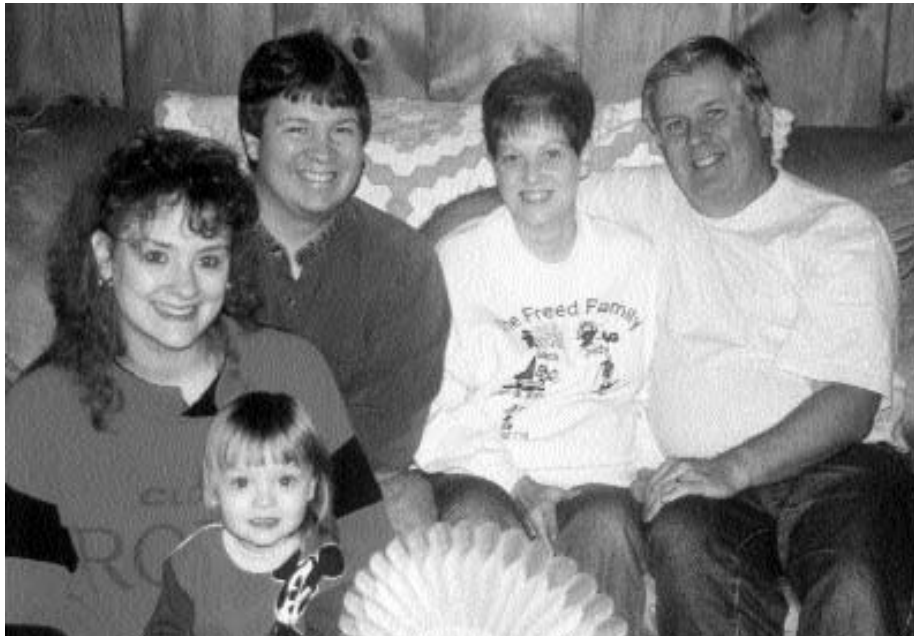
When I was growing up, our house served as a storage facility for the souvenirs associated with the town's unique celebration. From stuffed groundhogs to cookie cutters, face masks to seat cushions, books to key chains, it was all organized and housed at our place. Our telephone number was also listed in tourism publications as a contact number for Punxsutawney-related festivities, so conversations about Phil were quite common in our home.



Original Artwork by: David Learn

With this constant exposure to groundhogs, it was natural for me to become fascinated and captured by the allure of the famous furball. In reality, of

course, I was also learning to appreciate the values and charm a small town has to offer. But it wasn't until I headed off to college, and later when I moved to Pittsburgh, that I started to realize just how special Punxsutawney really is. Imagine my surprise when I got to college and found out that we actually had to attend classes on February 2nd? Who ever heard of such a thing?! I was also disappointed to learn that Carlino's wasn't a national chain restaurant where I could find my favorite burgers (covered with a special mystery sauce and encased in a hotdog bun, of course).



The Freed family are longtime fans of Punxsutawney Phil. When their hometown was recreated for the motion picture Groundhog Day, these Punxsy residents assisted the producers in making the film as realistic as possible. Beginning at the bottom and moving clockwise: Carrie, Amy, Alan, Judy, and Jack Freed.

Now that I live near Pittsburgh, I certainly miss a number of aspects of living in Punxsutawney. When I make one of my frequent visits back home, it is enormously refreshing to walk down the street and know the names of almost everyone I encounter. I have a two-year-old daughter who would certainly benefit from the top-notch teachers I had while growing up there. I like the fact that I can park my car in town and not have to worry about whether I forgot to lock my doors.

Having spent much of my career as a radio DJ, there are a lot of things about Punxsutawney I miss that have been ridiculed by coworkers at "big city" radio stations. I must admit that every time I hear a fire whistle, I immediately reach for the radio. Some folks at Pittsburgh stations nearly fall off their chairs in a fit of

All photos courtesy of Alan Freed

## A Movie Sparks New Interest In Our Town

I can remember hearing the first rumors about a movie being made about Groundhog Day. "Yeah, right," was my initial response. But early in 1992 the rumors started sounding more and more real. Since my parents were very involved in the town, the movie folks started contacting them with questions about various aspects of the town. "What exactly goes on at Gobbler's Knob on February 2nd?" "What other events take place on Groundhog Day?" "Do people sit in chairs or do they stand during Phil's prediction?"

The calls became more frequent as time went on, and my mom was regularly sending souvenirs, shirts and information to Illinois, where the film was to be shot. The movie company wanted a lot of pictures so they could replicate various aspects of the "real" Punxsutawney in the Hollywood version being constructed 600 miles away. My dad, Jack, and my brother, Matt, shot numerous rolls of film depicting many "exciting" elements of our town, like police car logos, fire hydrants, the 20-foot-tall groundhog that used to be in the spot where McDonald's now stands, license plates, and even vehicle registration stickers.

At various times, each member of our family made the journey to Woodstock, IL, to see a portion of the filming of *Groundhog Day*. It was a pilgrimage we all felt compelled to make as true fans of Phil and his hometown. What an experience that trip was! I'll never forget leaving after work on a Wednesday at noon and driving straight to Woodstock, stopping only once in Toledo, Ohio, for gas. By the time I got to Woodstock at 9:00 that night, I was as wide-eyed and excited as could be to see the movie version of the town where I had spent so many years.

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ABOVE: The author, Alan Freed (right), with star Bill Murray, on the movie set of *Groundhog Day*. Murray offered Freed his own specially-made breakfast burritos, which he claimed were an important part of his movie-making regimen. LOWER RIGHT: Judy Freed, Alan's mom, at the "Bed & Breakfast" featured in the film.

laughter after learning that the radio station in Punxsutawney actually tells listeners where the fires are once the whistles are sounded downtown.

Those same people nearly need medication to control themselves after I tell them that the announcements about the fires are sponsored by a local insurance company. But now that I live in a larger community, I must say that this was a pretty nice service to have! My radio buddies also mock the notion of reading obituaries, hospital admissions and small town stories about the installation of new stop signs.

But these are exactly the kinds of stories that now give me a warm, fuzzy feeling about my past, especially considering the kinds of news we hear on the radio and TV down here. Luckily we live in a nice area several miles away from the city, but frankly, I wouldn't mind if more of our news stories were centered around school fundraisers and church dinners.



When I pulled into town it was pitch dark, and I was to meet up with my brother, who had spent the week there. As I parked at the town square, I saw the name Punxsutawney attached to many things. It was as though I was walking through some sort of dream. I was mesmerized by the storefronts with Punxsutawney names, like the Smart Shop and Stewart's Drug Store. There was a Punxsutawney Library and even a fictitious Punxsutawney Mall.

Within minutes of beginning to walk down the street, however, I was snapped back to reality when I walked directly into a large cement light pole. But even that large slab of concrete didn't wipe the smile off my face. It was about that time that I realized just how cool it was going to be to see a movie set in Punxsutawney. After waiting a few minutes to let the cement imprint fade from my face, I finally located my brother in a small restaurant. I learned that he had appeared as an extra in the movie during the previous few days. If you know exactly where to look, you can see my brother in two scenes - but you definitely have to know where to look!

While we were there, we also had several opportunities to meet Bill Murray, the star of the film. Murray even offered us his own specially-made breakfast burritos, which he claimed were an important part of his movie-making regimen. Harold Ramis, a co-star of Murray's in *Ghostbusters* and the director of *Groundhog Day*, turned out to be one of the most pleasant people we've ever met. In fact, he approached us upon learning that we were from the "real" Punxsutawney. He was keenly interested in how we thought the movie was portraying the town.

In the end, I was very pleased with the outcome of the movie. Granted, many of us wished it could have been filmed in Punxsutawney, but Woodstock was certainly a beautiful stand-in. The movie has been an incredible boost for worldwide interest in the holiday - not to mention the fact that all the "pretender" groundhogs around the globe now know who the official "King of the Groundhogs" really is!

## Modern Technology Helps Spread the Word of Phil's Fame

After leaving the radio profession in 1995, I started working at a Pittsburgh company called OnTV. At that time, the Internet was this mysterious "thing" that only a few geeks - er, people - seemed to understand. Since then, we have been in the business of providing websites for clients, and creating unique content to help give our clients more exposure through banner advertisements.

*A collage of the three major Punxsutawney websites which Freed has designed.*



One interesting project we created several years ago involved churches. We offered free, editable web pages for every church in North America. The project was huge, and earned the participation of more than 100,000 churches. I had the opportunity to present the project to numerous denominational groups around the country during that time. In each city I visited, I found Punxsutawney to be a great ice-breaker during my speeches. I always made a point of letting people know that I lived

near Pittsburgh (which never brought much of a reaction from the crowd), but that my hometown was Punxsutawney. Every time I mentioned Punxsutawney there was an audible reaction from the crowd.

I remember giving a speech in Dallas, Texas, where some people were surprised to learn that Punxsutawney actually existed! I was amazed to see how many people thought Punxsutawney had been invented by Hollywood screenwriters. During my speeches I would often field more questions about my hometown than about the Internet service we were offering!

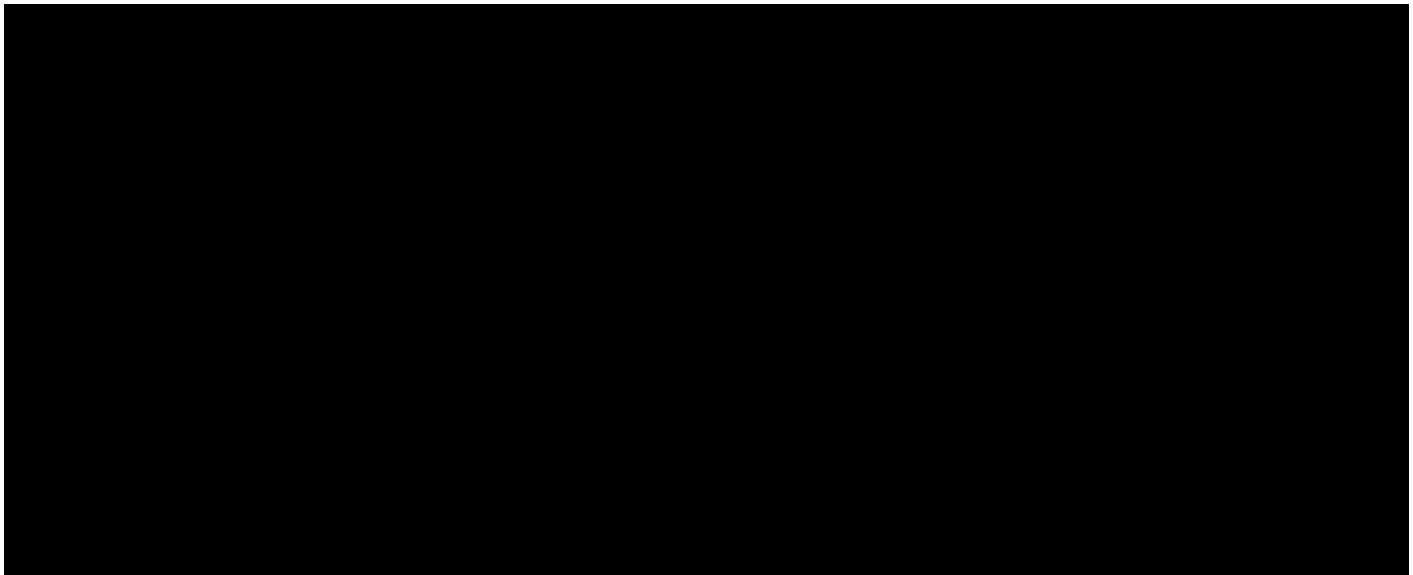
In January of 1999, just six days before Groundhog Day, I came up with an idea to help promote the town on the web. I had attended every Groundhog Day for at least 15 years, and I took pictures every time. I have a stack of pictures several inches high, and I thought it would be fun to give people a chance to take a look at the happenings on Gobbler's Knob. The next morning I approached my coworkers about creating "PunxsutawneyPhil.com."

Everyone was tremendously enthusiastic about pitching in to create the project in time for Groundhog Day. Within three days, we produced a 400-page website with hundreds of photos, electronic postcards, a "Groundhogese Translator," an "Ask Phil" feature, and other fun items. By the time Groundhog Day rolled around, a large story about our site appeared on the front page of the second section of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The site had tens of thousands of visitors on February 2, 1999, and the number went well over a million on Groundhog Day 2000! Last year I volunteered to redesign the Groundhog Club's official website, Groundhog.org, and I have been working closely with the Chamber of Commerce to help their

Internet efforts at Punxsutawney.com. We have worked to let each of the sites serve its own purpose while using each one to promote the others.

Living in Punxsutawney has certainly made me appreciate that the "small town" lifestyle is one we should try to preserve. While some people may mock the notion of living in a small town (as Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day* says: "That's right, Rita, they're hicks!"), I believe it really is the best way to live!



Original Artwork by:  
Stacy Long

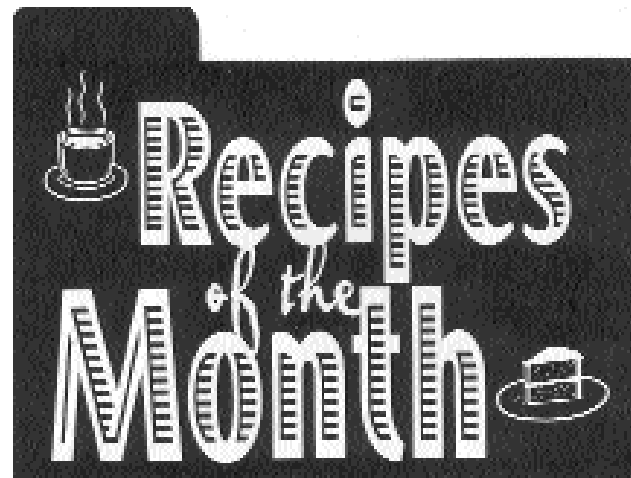


By Sue Cluster

The holidays are over, and here we are in the dark, frosty days of mid-winter. Everything outside is cold, so this is the time to heat it up inside! It's time for Comfort Food.

We all hope to get through the winter without a cold - or worse yet, the dreaded flu - but even if you're not so lucky, what is more comforting than a bowl of hot, homemade soup? Or, if you simply have those mid-winter doldrums, try one of these soups with crusty French bread, a pretty table, and a roaring fire. Soup, as far as I'm concerned, could end wars, cure disease, and bring the world together as one. Soup is the perfect food. In this fast-paced world, though, people seem to think they don't have enough time to make soup. That's crazy! One of the best things about soup is that you just throw everything in one pot and forget it. Your house will even smell wonderful, and you just can't get that from a can.

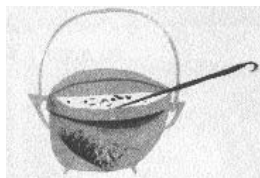
In a tribute to Comfort Food, I have put some recipes together that will warm your heart, fill your stomach, and make your family very happy.



## Sausage Soup

*This soup will warm the cockles of your heart (along with everything else) - it's hot, spicy, and a meal in itself!*

- 1 ½ lbs. hot sausage or sweet sausage (it's your call)
- 2 medium green peppers, chopped
- 1 jalapeno pepper, chopped (handle carefully, especially the seeds - and do not touch your eyes)
- ½ c. celery, chopped
- 2 onions, chopped
- 2-3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 (28 oz.) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 Tbsp. sugar
- 1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 6 c. water
- 1 tsp. parsley
- 1 tsp. Italian seasoning
- 3 c. bowtie pasta



"Beautiful soup!  
Who cares for fish,  
game or any other dish?  
Who would not give all else  
for two pennyworth only  
of beautiful soup?"  
- Lewis Carroll (1832-1898),  
*Alice in Wonderland*

Brown the sausage, peppers, onions, celery and garlic. (Be careful not to burn the garlic or it will get bitter.) Add all other ingredients except bowties and simmer 1 hour. You can then simmer the bowties with the soup, but I prefer cooking them separately, then pouring the soup over them - the soup stays more clear.

## Becky's Chicken

*I owe this recipe to my daughter, who always seems to be rushing somewhere. I guess in this case, rushing is the Mother of Invention.*

- 6 chicken breast halves, boned and skinned
- salt & pepper
- 1 can mushroom soup
- 3 Tbsp. white wine
- ¾ c. Swiss cheese, shredded
- ½ c. bread crumbs

Arrange chicken in baking dish, salting and peppering. Mix soup and wine together, spread over chicken, sprinkle with grated Swiss cheese and bread crumbs. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

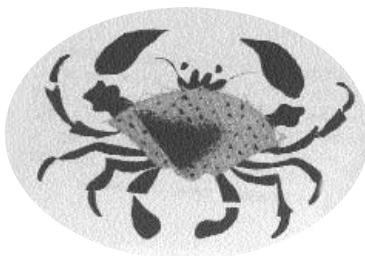
"Next to eating good dinners, a healthy man with a benevolent turn of mind must like, I think, to read about them."

- William M. Thackeray, (1811-1863)

# Crab Bisque

Here's an easy one:

- 1 (10 ¾ oz.) can cream of celery soup
- 1 (10 ¾ oz.) can pepper pot soup
- 1 pint Half and Half
- 1 (6 ½ oz.) can crab meat, drained
- ¼ c. sherry



"Of soup and love,  
the first is best."  
- Spanish Proverb

Mix soups and Half and Half. Shred crab meat and add. Heat.  
Just before serving, add sherry.

# Onion Mushroom Soup

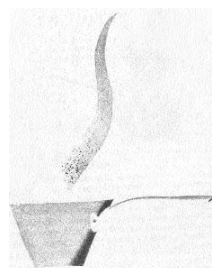


This is a creamy twist on the old French Onion Soup:

- 3 large onions, chopped
- 1 (8 oz.) package fresh button mushroom, chopped
- 1 (4 oz.) package fresh Shiitake mushrooms, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped (or as much as you like; I'm a garlic freak, so I would use twice that)
- 5 c. beef stock
- ½ c. white wine (optional)
- ¼ tsp. ground allspice
- 1 Tbsp. brown sugar
- 1 c. Half and Half
- ½ c. Parmesan cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste

Brown onions in butter until they are well caramelized (this takes awhile). Brown mushrooms until golden brown, then add garlic and sauté lightly. Add cooked vegetables to beef stock and simmer for half an hour. Add Half and Half and cheese and heat through. Serve with crusty French bread. You can add more cheese for garnish.

"Life is like an onion:  
you peel it off one layer  
at a time, and  
sometimes you weep."  
- Carl Sandburg (1878-1967)



# Mac and Cheese To Die For (no pun intended)

This recipe is not for the faint of heart if you're watching fat and calories, but it's wonderful, and so easy. It's a great recipe to take as a covered dish.

"Cheese - milk's leap  
toward immortality."  
- Clifton Fadiman

- 1 (8 oz.) can of ½ Parmesan and ½ Romano cheese
- 1qt Half and Half
- 1 pint whipping cream
- 1 stick butter
- 1 (16 oz) box mostaccioli (or any macaroni you prefer, but this seems to work best)



Cook mostaccioli according to package directions (do not overcook). While pasta is cooking, in a saucepan combine butter, Half and Half, and whipping cream. Heat slowly over medium heat and bring to a simmer for about 5 minutes, slowly adding cheese, and stirring constantly until mixture coats the back of a spoon. Drain mostaccioli (do not rinse). Spread 1/3 the liquid in the bottom of a 9 by 13 pan; add half the pasta and repeat for the next layer, etc. Bake in 350-degree oven for half an hour.

## A Footnote on Taste:

When I say "to taste" in my recipes, I mean to your taste. I love garlic and fresh ground black pepper, so if I tell you two cloves of garlic, I would probably use six cloves when making that dish for my family. That's what I love about cooking - you can be a truly free spirit! So be creative, and if it turns out badly, put on a big smile, walk to the table with confidence, and say, "This is the best I've ever made." Nine times out of ten, they'll agree with you.

Got a special recipe you'd like to share? We'd LOVE to try it! Send your favorite recipes to:  
Recipes, **Small Town Life Magazine**, 1046 Barnett Hill Road, Punxsutawney PA 15767. Or, email us: [editor@smalltownlifemagazine.com](mailto:editor@smalltownlifemagazine.com)

If we print your recipe, we'll give you credit as the chef! (Written contributions become the property of Small Town Life Magazine and cannot be returned.)