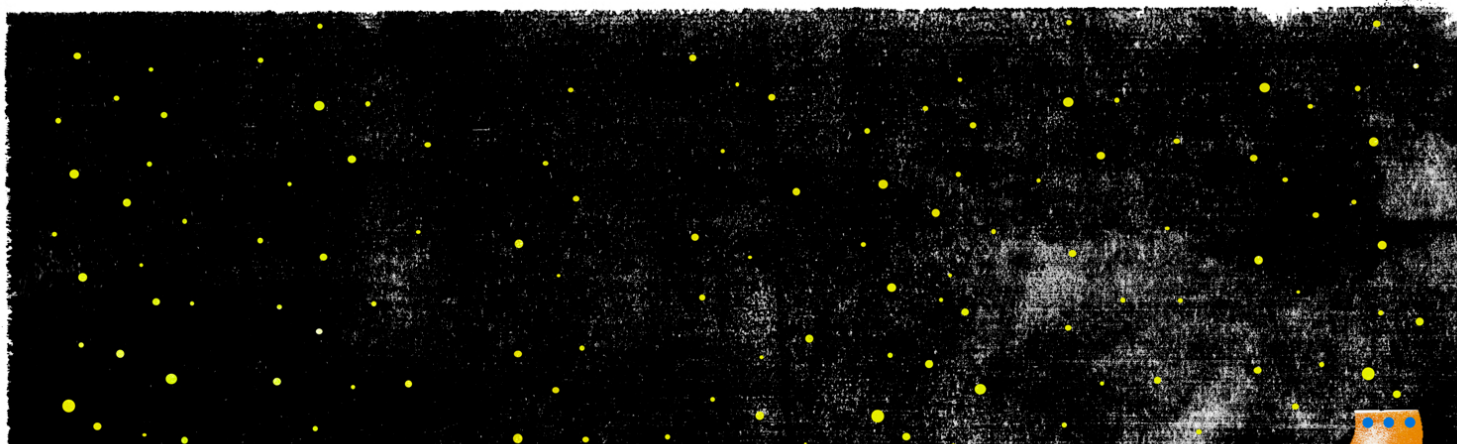


LUCKY PEACH



HISTORY

A Short History of Lipton Onion Soup Mix

The open "secret" of so many grandmothers' briskets

By ASHLEY GOLDSMITH

There is only one recipe my grandmother committed to paper for me: her brisket. Before I left for college, she scribbled an uncharacteristically detailed recipe onto an index card. There's a suggested oven temperature, a real grocery list—the kinds of details she is famous for omitting. Among the many ingredients are first-cut brisket, red wine, and a packet of Lipton Onion Soup & Dip Mix. The soup mix was the “secret” to her brisket, and now it is the secret to mine.

For those who are unfamiliar, onion soup mix is a fragrant powder: dehydrated onions, salt, onion powder, sugar, autolyzed yeast extract, MSG, and a handful of ingredients that only Harold McGee could pronounce. Dehydrated soups were on the rise by the mid-1940s, and Lipton, by then a well-known tea company, entered the dried-soup business in 1952. By the sixties, Lipton was leading the market, and in the seventies offered recipes for “souped up” meals in every magazine and newspaper ad. Souped-up pasta with beef-flavor mushroom mix, souped-up turkey with onion-mushroom soup mix.

In 1964, it found its way into to the pages of *Joy of Cooking*: “[Dried soup sauces] are not as quick as the canned ones but can provide a well-flavored base. Use in making sauces for casseroles.” Or brisket, or meatloaf, or kugel. It doesn't seem that anyone was actually making soup with the onion soup

mix. (It makes a pretty pathetic soup.) Instead, they were incorporating it into recipes.

Many Jewish-Americans loved the mix especially: they put Lipton soup mix in brisket, stuffed cabbage, and a dish called apricot chicken (a gloopy combination of apricot preserves, red Russian dressing, and onion soup mix poured over chicken breasts and then baked). “My grandma was raised in an Orthodox Yiddish-speaking home, and when she began her own household, she wanted to get away from her roots—so much so that she cooked ham on Sunday,” said Julia Braun, a certified kosher chef and owner of Noshland in Oakland. “There was this desire to be American and to cook American foods. So I think that there were certain ingredients that Jewish women in particular gravitated towards because they were a symbol of Americanization—and I think that the onion soup mix falls into that category.”

Onions are a central ingredient in Ashkenazi cuisine, which could be another clue as to why Jews took to onion soup mix. The allium is used in chopped chicken liver, on bialys and everything bagels, in whitefish salad, tossed with lox and scrambled eggs, grated into latkes, and pickled with herring. In the 1950 novel *One Foot in America*, author Yuri Suhl, a Polish immigrant, described the importance of onions in the old country and the new: “The main standby for flavoring and trimming was the onion. There was no limit to its use and versatility and there was no meal without it. Sliced, browned or cooked, it was there.”

For Ashkenazi Jews in America, onion soup mix was both familiar and new. Rather than slicing or browning onions for noodle kugel, blintzes, and brisket, busy housewives could obtain the same onion flavor in a fraction of the time. When I asked my grandmother—an avid home cook who makes nearly everything from scratch—why she used a packaged food in brisket, she matter-of-factly said that it’s because her mother used it. “I actually do really like the taste of it too,” she said. “It’s also one less thing that I have to do while cooking. You never just make brisket. You also make a lot of other things to go with it, so if I can just take a package and throw it in there then it’ll save me some time and some pots and pans.”

In the early nineties, the soup mix was renamed “Recipe Secrets,” and the line expanded to include an onion-mushroom mix and a garlic-herb mix. The Lipton website provides hundreds of those souped-up recipes, ones that use the mixes for dishes other than soup. The ubiquitous onion soup mix is no longer just a soup mix—it’s “The one and only classic! Great for dip, burgers, meatloaf, roasted potatoes, and many more.”

BRISKET, JEWISH, LIPTON, ONION SOUP MIX
