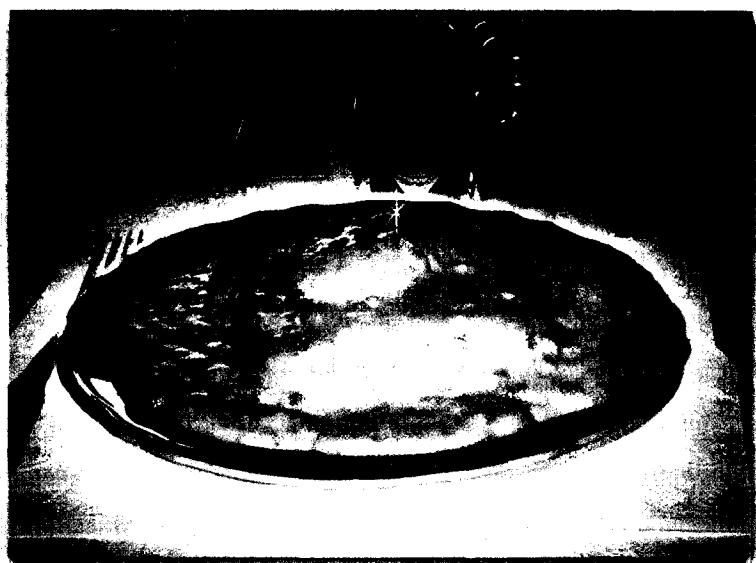


The Definitive Guide To Great SOS

By R. R. Keene



"Dit, dit, dit, dah, dah, dah, dit, dit, dit." Three dots, three dashes, three dots: SOS, a call for help in Morse code. "Bœuf à la sauce d'Argonne; s--- on a shingle": SOS, a call to morning chow in the U.S. Marine Corps.

SOS is made with creamed beef—not chipped beef or minced beef. It is served on toast, and after decades of being dished up by messmen the world over, it is still the stick-to-your-guts breakfast of champions in the U.S. Armed Forces.

And get this straight, the Marine Corps, not the Army, not the Navy, certainly not the Air Force, and probably not the Coast Guard, makes the best SOS in the entire world!

Legend has it that SOS was first served in France during World War I. Retired Marine Master Sergeant Dick Mangum's short thesis, which hypothesizes how SOS came to be the breakfast cuisine of the Corps, has been dished up, rehashed and passed around for some time. It is from a few of his conclusions that we draw our own.

It was Army cooks who came up with the idea to fire up their field stoves and get hot chow to Marines advancing along the eastern front. It was no easy task. The leathernecks moved quickly, and the "doggie" Army mess company and field kitchens were falling behind. The first sign of trouble on the menu came when the chief cook's original recipe of *Bœuf à la sauce d'Argonne* had no takers for the evening meal.

"Where are the Marines?"

"They have moved again," was the reply.

"Send the messmen to find them!"

They found the Marines at dawn, cold and concealed. But alas, the *Bœuf à la sauce* was cold and congealed.

The chief cook may have shed tears of frustration, as when someone heats *vichyssoise*, but the Marine first sergeant, as old Marine first soldiers were prone to be, was a very miserly chap: "Waste not, want not."

Every rifleman was issued a slice of dry bread onto which the *Bœuf à la sauce froid* was dumped. And from the ranks, a leatherneck blighter whose name has been lost in time dared to complain, "This looks like s---!" And the rest is gastronomic history. What's more, the Marines asked for seconds.

Marines quickly realized that SOS, especially when heated, was far more palate-pleasing than "reserve rations" that consisted of a pound of canned "Willie" (meat, usually corned beef) and hard bread with coffee. Scuttlebutt had it that there were things called "trench rations," hermetically sealed iron containers of food weighing 107 pounds, designed to supplement reserve rations and keep out mustard gas, but few Marines had reason to believe they existed.

The Marines did, however, sample "special-need meals" (emergency rations), interesting if not appetizing concoctions of three 3-ounce cakes of beef powder, cooked wheat and three 1-ounce chocolate bars.

The war boiled down to an armistice, and Americans sang the Tin Pan Alley song, "We Don't Want the Bacon—What We Want Is a Piece of the Rhine." And Marines started enjoying SOS more as a breakfast favorite than an evening meal. All the services started serving variations, which depended primarily on the food stores and abilities of the cooks. The more expensive and harder-to-keep-in-supply beef roasts gave way to the less expensive ground beef and very cheap hamburger or even sausage. It didn't matter; the Marines still wolfed it down.

SOS started appearing on menus at posts and stations of the Corps around the world. The breakfast menu for Sunday, Sept. 22, 1940, at Headquarters, Fourth Marine Regiment, Shanghai, China, was preserved pears, dry cereal, milk, fried potatoes, bacon, omelet, dry toast, butter, coffee and creamed beef. SOS also started to be served at military clubs and civilian-run military restaurant concessions.

It is often still ordered with eggs, over easy, on the top. It also

MSgt Bernie Parker's Marine Breakfast

(Serves 8 or two hungry Marines)

- 1/2 pound ground beef (ground chuck for flavor)
- 1 tablespoon bacon fat (lard/Crisco or butter)
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 2 cups whole milk (add more milk if you want it thinner)
- 1/8 teaspoon salt and pepper (to taste)
- 8 slices of dry toast

Using a large skillet (12" to 14"), crumble and brown the ground beef with the fat and salt. Remove the pan from heat and let cool slightly. Mix in the flour until all the meat is covered (use all the flour). Replace the skillet on the heat and stir in the milk. Keep stirring until the mixture comes to a boil and thickens (boil a minimum of one minute). Serve over toast.

Other variations or additions of the above recipe include combinations of a teaspoon each of dried basil or oregano, a dash of paprika, 1/2 cup of sliced mushrooms and 1/3 cup sliced black olives. You also can use nonfat dry milk or water.

The secret, according to great SOS chefs, is to slowly sift in the flour, stir constantly over low heat, thoroughly blend and never to brown the mixture. Most also say that there should be no need to add salt, as great SOS dishes, like the Marines eating it, are salty enough.

Leatherneck's World-Famous SOS Recipe

This is our own special and favorite recipe perfected by the late Capt Frank Priest, USMC (Ret) and the late MSgt Robert F. "Bobby" Fleischauer, USMC (Ret). We find it to be without peer.

- 1 1/2 pounds extra lean hamburger or ground chuck
- 2 tablespoons oleo or butter
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce (or less to taste)
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 cups milk
- salt and pepper to taste
- sliced bread

Brown the meat, then drain. Add oleo. Stir in the onions and cook until you can see through them. Add flour, stir and cook two to three minutes. Add garlic, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce and mix thoroughly. Add milk and stir until it thickens. Serve over bread.



The Official USMC Food Service Association Recipe of SOS

For two manly men. This is extracted from the USMC Recipe Manual, NAVMC 1067-SD, circa 1952.

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| 1 1/4 pounds ground beef | 1 1/2 cups beef stock for milk |
| 3 1/4 tablespoons chopped onions | salt to taste |
| 3 1/4 tablespoons bacon fat | monosodium glutamate (optional) |
| 4 3/4 tablespoons flour | black pepper to taste |
| 1 1/2 cups evaporated milk | |

Cook meat in its own fat until brown, stirring frequently. Cook onions in bacon fat, add flour and blend thoroughly. Mix milk and beef stock and heat. Add hot milk mixture to fat and flour mixture. Heat to boiling point, boil one minute, stirring constantly. Add salt, MSG and pepper. Pour sauce over meat. Simmer until meat is well done, but not overcooked. Serve over toast points or biscuits.

Note: If you've been wondering why you just can't get your SOS to taste like it did back in the old Corps, look to your beef stock for the answer. Make a rich stock from beef bones per the procedure of that time, then carefully follow this recipe for a true reproduction of that old Marine Corps SOS.

Several of you have asked about a "red" version of SOS (tomato based). Here is the Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps recipe.

Minced Beef

(As an added bonus we will allow you to do the math and work it down to the portions you desire. This recipe feeds 100.)

20 pounds beef patty mix, bulk or beef ground, thawed
1½ quarts onions, dry, chopped
7½ cups flour, wheat, general purpose, sifted
2¼ gallons tomatoes, canned, crushed
2 tablespoons mace, ground or nutmeg ground (optional)
2 tablespoons salt
2 teaspoons pepper, black

Cook beef with onions in its own fat until beef loses its pink color, stirring to break apart. Drain or skim off excess fat. Sprinkle flour over beef; continue cooking until flour is absorbed. Add tomatoes, mace or nutmeg, salt and pepper. Stir well. Simmer 10 to 15 minutes. Serve over toast, biscuits, rice or pasta.

Nutritional values per 5-ounce serving: Calories 333; protein 16.9 grams; fat 24.3 grams; carbohydrates 11 grams; cholesterol 77 milligrams.

Originally thought to be introduced to the States by the Pennsylvania Dutch, dried beef is an American staple. Served with cream sauce, it has a salty and distinctive flavor.

Bill Hughson's 1953 Parris Island Chipped Beef on Toast

Melt 2 tablespoons of butter, add shredded beef or 1 small jar of sliced dried beef and fry.
Add 2 tablespoons of flour and stir.
Add 1 cup milk. Stir until desired thickness.

This is a recipe for low-fat, but rich-tasting cream sauce we cumshawed off the Web.

Low-Fat Cream Sauce

2 tablespoons dairy-free margarine or extra-virgin olive oil
1½ to 3 tablespoons unbleached flour

Blended Mixture:

1 cup soy, almond or rice milk
½ cup extra-firm SILKEN tofu or regular medium-firm tofu, crumbled
½ cup water
1 "chicken-style" vegetarian broth cube (or enough for 1 cup of liquid), crumbled
½ teaspoon salt
a large pinch each of freshly grated nutmeg and white pepper

Blend all "Blended Mixture" ingredients except the nutmeg and pepper in a blender until smooth. Set aside. Melt margarine in saucepan and whisk in flour until you have a white "roux." Scrape into the blended mixture, blend again for a few seconds and then pour the mixture back into the pot. Stir until it thickens and boils. Whisk in nutmeg and pepper. Pour over the meat.

is enjoyed served over fried potatoes, hash browns or biscuits, and sometimes is washed down with a bottle of beer.

Almost invariably a true connoisseur of SOS splashes liberal amounts of McIlhenny's Louisiana Tabasco Pepper Sauce over the course. This is because it gives SOS a distinct flavor. It also is because Marines have learned to splash McIlhenny's Tabasco on nearly everything edible and because Walter S. "Tabasco Mac" McIlhenny himself was a Marine brigadier general. Leathernecks find it impossible to imagine that anyone could make a better hot sauce.

World War II saw SOS, sometimes referred to unsuccessfully by the more genteel as the "same old stuff," rise to unrivaled familiarity if not always popularity as the taste buds of America's youth became familiar with the dish whose appearance, at best, resembled a very poor man's beef stroganoff. It also started seeing variations. The Army often served it with chipped and salted dried beef. The Navy sometimes used beans and tomatoes.

Even the Corps had problems with consistency. Burnell Focks of Guymon, Okla., served with Company B, 1st Motor Transport Battalion, I Marine Amphibious Corps during WW II. He told *Leatherneck* in 1997: "The recipe for SOS from 1942 to 1945 was gravy made with powdered milk and most of the time lumpy, ground beef mostly cooked, but sometimes partly raw

served on a shingle ranging from warm to burnt black."

OK, so there were a couple of Marines who, because of unfortunate circumstances, failed to appreciate SOS. On the whole, however, they recall it fondly like their rifle: remembering the serial number and not the recoil.

Although there is no Meals, Ready to Eat version of SOS, by all indications it is still a favorite among members of the U.S. Armed Forces, from Haiti to Bosnia to Afghanistan to Baghdad and Djibouti. Military cooks from all the services attending school at Fort Lee, Va., still learn the finer points of creating morning chow's *pièce de résistance*.

"I don't know what it is about greasy hamburger in pale-colored flour over burnt, usually cold, toast that gets the gastro-nomic juices flowing," the "Sound Off" editor wrote in the October 1998 *Leatherneck* (page 63), "but it certainly does, and it stays with you long after you've wolfed down the last morsel on the plate. It stays with you throughout your whole career and will probably be the source of strange rumblings and emissions from beneath your gravestone marker."

Now that you have read the definitive words on SOS, I don't know about you, but I'm famished. *Bon appétit*, chowhounds!

