

## HANGTOWN FRY

When one thinks of the history of the Mother Lode, food isn't the first thing that comes to mind. During the Gold Rush the local residents had other priorities than worrying about what to make for dinner. Even so good a friend to the Mother Lode as Mark Twain said that the miners "ate beans and dishwater for breakfast, dishwater and beans for dinner, and both articles warmed over for supper".

Come to think of it, my great-grandfather, whom I met shortly before he died and who worked as a miner in the Comstock Lode in Nevada as a youngster, loved cold baked bean sandwiches. That must be a miner's delicacy, although I shudder at the thought.

There is, however, one dish that is important to the culinary history of the Mother Lode. That dish is Hangtown Fry, named for its place of origin, the cheerfully named Hangtown, today's Placerville. As the story goes, the dish was created to satisfy the appetite of a newly struck-it-rich miner who wanted a dish made with the most expensive ingredients available. And in the mining camps, that meant fresh eggs, which sold for about \$5 an egg, and fresh oysters, which had to be shipped all the way from the coast. He didn't care how it tasted; he just wanted to spend money. I'm sure we both know people like that today!

Actually, Hangtown Fry tastes pretty good, although I realize that my view may not be the majority opinion in this. For Hangtown Fry is essentially an omelet, filled with bacon and breaded and fried oysters. You'll need 5 eggs, 4 slices of bacon, 1 cup of cracker crumbs, (or you can use the crispy Panko bread crumbs), and six medium shucked oysters. You can get fresh oysters at the local supermarkets now and open and shuck them yourself, but it's a lot easier to get a jar of shucked oysters out of the seafood case.

Cook the bacon over medium heat in a large skillet until almost crisp and let it drain on paper towels. Save a couple of tablespoons of the bacon fat and discard the rest, wiping the skillet clean. Whisk together one egg and a splash of milk in a small bowl until thoroughly mixed. Spread out the crumbs in a shallow dish.

Gently pat the oysters dry and dip them into the egg mixture. Then dredge them in the crumbs, coating them thoroughly, and put them on a plate to set up for a couple of minutes.

Heat three tablespoons of vegetable oil—I use canola—over high heat in your skillet and quickly fry the oysters until the crust is cooked, about 30 seconds a side. The trick is to cook the crust without overcooking the oysters and making them tough. You may need to do this in a couple of batches to avoid overcrowding the oysters in the pan. Set your cooked oysters aside for a couple of minutes while you prepare the eggs.

Beat the remaining four eggs together in a bowl with another splash of milk, a pinch of salt and a couple of drops of liquid hot pepper seasoning. In a large non-stick skillet, heat up one tablespoon of the reserved bacon fat over medium-high heat. Place two bacon slices in the pan, slightly off center, laying them parallel to each other and about an inch apart. Pour about a quarter of the beaten egg over the bacon and turn the heat down to medium-low.

Lay three of the oysters over the bacon slices. Pour another quarter of the beaten egg over the oysters, and cover the pan and cook for a couple of minutes, until the eggs are almost set. Using a spatula, carefully fold the omelet in half. Cover the pan and cook until the eggs are thoroughly set, another one to two minutes. Carefully slide the omelet onto a warm plate. Repeat the process with the remaining bacon drippings, eggs and oysters for the second omelet. This serves two and can be doubled or quadrupled. You can add some chopped green onion to the eggs, if you like.

So who says there's no culinary history in the Mother Lode? This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.