



Spring 2017

## Béchamel

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Ramaiya, Jhanvi C., "Béchamel" (2017). *Student Publications*. 513.  
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# Béchamel

## Abstract

"In fluid, confident prose, this essay deftly moves through fascinating historical background on one of the 'mother sauces' and into a story of mother-to-daughter education before turning its focus to a story of learning through a blend of past teachings and independent experiences." - Elissa Washuta, Author, Judge for the Virginia Woolf Essay Prize

## Keywords

Bechamel, french sauces, Africa, Kitchen

## Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Nonfiction

## Comments

Written for ENG 306: Writing the Memoir. Received Second Place for the 2017 Virginia Woolf Essay Prize.

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## *Béchamel*

There are five basic bases in the French sauce world—named mother sauces: Béchamel, Velouté, Espagnole, Sauce Tomat, and Hollandaise. I learned this from the film *The 100 Foot Journey*. Hassan, a young man who moves with his family to France to escape Muslim persecution in India, decides that he wants to learn how to cook as the French do—his father disapproves, but the sous-chef at the restaurant across the street agrees to teach him. Marguerite conspires with Hassan to invite him into the world of French cuisine. He spends all night creating each of the five sauces to perfection, waiting for her arrive to their riverside hideout so she can approve. The first, the béchamel, is perhaps the most important of the five. In early France, only the rich could use milk in their sauces. The poor had no refrigeration, and thus the béchamel became a wealthy man's extravagance.<sup>1</sup>

Despite béchamel's rich beginnings, no one can pinpoint its origin. The first theory is that the Queen Catherine de Medici, Italian born, married to King Henri II of France in 1533, brought her personal chefs with her—chefs who created the Italian sauce in a French court. The second theory revolves around Duke Phillippe De Mornay who, in the 1600's, was credited with having created multiple sauces. The third potential creator, Marquis Louis de Bechamel (1603 - 1703), was said to have created béchamel to revive his dry cod. The final theory, and one that is said to be the most plausible, is the theory of the mid 1600's, that credits the sauce to Chef Francois Pierre de la Varenne, King Louis XIV's court chef.

I have never managed to produce a béchamel in a manner reflective of its regal past. When I make Béchamel, it usually comes out a little bit too watery, a little bit too flavorless and bland, or else the milk spoils and the béchamel turns sour. There is no one way to

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<sup>1</sup> [whatscookingamerica.net](http://whatscookingamerica.net)

explain why. It just does. Making Béchamel is an exacting task. One slip up, one little bit too much or too little of one ingredient and the whole sauce *is gone*. To explain the *why* perhaps it is important to know *how*.

**Ingredients (to make enough Béchamel for the family):**

1. Two cups milk (*Preferably whole – your sauce will be heartier, and your taste buds will thank you for it - promise*).
2. Two Teaspoons Salted Butter (*REAL BUTTER. This is not a suggestion. It may be unsalted; you can add salt to taste once your sauce is ready*).
3. Two Tablespoons of Flour (*White. Whole-wheat has been done. Whole-wheat left a rather unappealing powdery taste to the sauce*).

My mother knows these ingredients well – she taught them to me. As a chef whose modes of measurement were typically in pinches and “a little bit,” béchamel was not her forte. Yet she mastered it. Two teaspoons, two tablespoons, two cups. Just the right amount of mixing and knowing when to let the béchamel congeal.

I learned to cook in my mother’s kitchen. I started out as her food prepper. I was explicitly not allowed to cook until I knew how to prep. This is how all the greatest chefs started, too. Or so she said.

I had no problem with prepping (except on days when my sister got to cook, and I was tied up with dicing coriander). I believe part of my being held back from cooking was the danger associated with seven-year-olds and fire. Yet, I know that hidden with the caution was discipline. It was later that I learned that what she wanted for us out of our time in the kitchen was to learn independence. We couldn’t be independent unless we had to the tools to survive; in an Indian household, learning to feed yourself was a matter of the highest priority (after educating yourself).

In our kitchen, so small that more than one chef equaled too many chefs in the kitchen, I first learned to make salads. I would sit on the floor, chopping up onions (trying not to cry) and julienning carrots. I learned how to cube a tomato without turning it to a pulp. My mother was insistent; she wanted to teach her daughters the flavorfulness that could come from combining raw vegetables. It was only later that she showed me how to combine olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette with seasoning to create a dressing. I moved up the paygrade to helping grind up tomato to a juice for sauce, and shredding beetroot. The last beetroot I massacred for a long time was when I was ten years old. I was talking, as I am prone to do, and I shredded my gregarious fingers along with the beetroot. Hand bandaged, I insisted that I was going to finish.

“Let me *do* it!” I yelled as I nursed my cut fingers.

The answer was a solid, unwavering, *no*.

I was finally allowed to make a pasta dish in the eighth grade. All those years watching my mother and sister, and my obsession with trying to figure out why I wasn’t allowed to touch the pot finally ended. Grabbing the pot and putting it down on the stove was an exciting day indeed.

“Ok, now what do you do?” My mother, ever the teacher (in the home and with her elementary schoolers beginning to master basic motor skills needed to draw), began walking me through the process, trying to figure out if I was ready to handle the responsibility.

“Turn on the stove and pour in a little bit of oil?” I said, gleeful that finally, I knew the answers.

“Yes, but you haven’t started the prep work. *Don’t turn on the stove until you have everything you need.*”

I sighed. Here we were, on the cusp of something brilliant, and I was headed back to *prepwork*. My entry into the world of fire, bubbling stews, and the smell of masalas wandering around the home and down the stairs had been stalled.

Reluctantly, I pulled out an onion and a few cloves of garlic from the dry vegetable basket. I set them down on the counter gently – I wasn’t about to make and serve a bruised concoction. At the time, I assumed that anything would bruise if it dropped far enough. I handled the tomatoes lovingly in my hands as I brought them to the counter top. I cut the tomatoes (no pulp) and dropped them gently into the blender. I intended to pulverize them, but only when I was ready. I poured a cup of water into the blender and stopped.

I washed my knife, and began my routine of prep work, washing the onion (knowing now that wet, this onion would not make me cry as much) and peeling off its top layer of skin, rubbing all the dirt off, and then setting it down. I filleted it, an old fisherman with my shiny serrated blade.

My mother watched anxiously, standing right behind me because we didn’t have a choice with so little space, “Be careful! Don’t slice open your finger! No fingers in front of the blade, *Janu be careful!*”

I was not careful. Nor was I worried. I had spent years practicing, and I had given thousands of hours in practice to my craft. I was more at home behind the knife and any given vegetable that dared to cross me than I was with a recipe in my hand.

The rest of that sauce went well. I worked with my mother’s voice over my shoulder, telling me to wait to add the garlic until the onions were pink enough.

“What’s pink *enough*?”

“You’ll know.”

She told how much salt to add, “enough so you can just taste it, it’ll get better as it absorbs.”

“What if my tongue can’t taste that little salt?”

“Then it’ll be too salty and you’ll live with it.”

I do not work in exact measurements (and I have learned, over the years, to stop yearning for them). My kitchen at College, after all, does not come with the supplies to measure. I am the proud borrower of one measuring cup (that shows me exactly how much is in one-third of a cup) and owner of several mismatched measuring spoons of varying amounts with their measurements worn off via time and use.

Béchamel, in theory, is the simplest sauce of all. It not even a sauce, but rather a base. You can add to it, create something bigger, louder. It could turn a bleak dish (with little hope of rejuvenation) into a buttery, pale, delight to the senses. It should not be so difficult, but this is a finicky sauce. You cannot tell béchamel what to do. Béchamel tells you.

When there is no sauce in the home, all you need are three simple ingredients to whip up a béchamel, and throw it into whatever pot you wish. Béchamel has served as a thickener for my soups, a revival for my roasted vegetables, and on its own as a simple topping for my late night pasta cravings.

If you wonder how, with so few and simple ingredients, such a buttery masterpiece might go wrong, there is no specific answer. Your measurements of any and all ingredients

may be wrong. The consistency of your roux (the melted butter, then accompanied by flour) may be too thick or too close to liquid.

**Directions:**

1. Add pot to stove, turn on stove (to a medium setting), allow pot to heat.
2. Throw in your butter, let it melt as the pot heats – stir constantly so it doesn't brown and burn (*I had it burn once in Copenhagen but my host family still ate it. They said it made their rigatoni taste like toast*).
3. Once the butter is mostly soft and liquid, add flour. Mix vigorously (weight training recommended) until you create a pinkish blend of flour and butter (*It should seem almost too dry, like you've made an accident*).
4. Add a splash of milk, stirring as fast as you possibly can to blend the roux into the milk (*now, this is the most desperate part of getting the lumps out of your sauce. This is the only point when there is little enough in your pot to let you catch them all*).
5. Add a little more milk, continue stirring violently until you have achieved a thick, creamy consistency (*don't be afraid to get rough. Once all the milk is in, you'll be stirring so slow you'll think you're rocking a baby to sleep*).
6. Add the rest of the milk – stir at a moderate pace so as not to spill. Do not stop stirring until everything seems blended. Even then, stand over your pot, keep stirring very slowly so the liquid keeps moving (*or else the bottom will burn*).
7. Turn off the sauce when it begins to thicken. Let it sit for about five minutes, and it should have achieved a creamy consistency – this is when it is okay to add a little salt and pepper.

Tonight, I ruined a batch of the sauce. I tried too hard. I wrote about the sauce, complained about it. It, in turn, complained about me, and began to bubble. When a

béchamel bubbles, the béchamel is lost. You must understand this, and let it go. If a béchamel is not good, it is not just bad, but rather ruined.

The bubbles, just a little bit too high, meant that the milk had spoiled. I just poured it down the drain. My forays in sauce-making would likely be more successful if they were supervised (*oh, if my mother were here!*) and done without an inspired me sitting at a laptop.

Perhaps I am lamenting too severely the downfall of my culinary experience as my mother's lack of presence in my kitchen. After all, in my head, I can hear her voice as I make anything new.

"Jhanvi, you're not stirring enough! Stop running from your pot!"

The secret, my mother always told me, was to keep stirring. Perhaps this is where my biggest fault lies. I am not a patient woman, nor am I a patient cook. When I put something on the stove, I expect it to be ready quickly, without much intervention.

In my first three years at college, I had had one micro fridge with which to survive. My ability to create food extended to sandwiches and ramen. The sandwiches were made with a loaf of wheat bread, a smooth layer of pesto, cut-up cherry tomatoes, and slices of pre-cut cheese. The ramen, however, allowed my roommate and I to get creative. A vegetarian, I stuck to buying chicken-flavored ramen and throwing out the seasoning. We would add peanut butter into the drained noodles (cooked for three minutes on high and then left covered for five minutes) to create a Pad Thai. Dried seaweed sheets and we had a sort of miso noodle soup. A little pesto, and we had a sort of pasta. Bottles of pre-made tomato sauce sufficed for when we were feeling especially lazy. String cheese was always a must.

Tonight, the second batch of béchamel fared far better than the first. I stood over it diligently. Never letting it come to a boil, stirring continuously so the lumps faded into indiscernible pellets. I still cannot beat all of the lumps from existence. My mother has taught me well, but I could never exactly recreate her whisk – so exacting in her sauce that the lumps begged to disappear to avoid her hand. And when it was ready, I poured it over steaming noodles and a mix of vegetables heated in olive oil. Spiced it. Ate it—devoured it.

My mother's kitchen was always immaculate. My sister and I would cook and help clean (barely) at the end of the night. The countertops would be wiped, the stove scrubbed clean of all sticky residue, and anything sweet was packed up. A forced venture into obsessive cleanliness was a hazard of a Dar es Salaami kitchen – we lived in the hot, sticky tropics. Humidity has a penchant for helping bugs prosper.

The ants, the cockroaches, and the grasshoppers (who were dependent on the seasons) would swarm into the kitchen when the lights turned out, and if we had cleared the countertops and the floors well enough, they would be gone by the time the first rays of sunlight filtered into our kitchen. The windows were mesh with bars across them, so the morning chill permeated our kitchen, and those first rays warmed it. Akin to a pot being brought to a boil, our kitchen heated with the afternoon sun as well. Cooking after noon or before 5.00 p.m. meant asking to sweat. This is not the sweat you imagine in America. It is an unimaginable sweat, the humidity clinging to your clothing, and the heat of the open gas flame adding to your horror. The breeze wafting through the mesh panels was well warmed too, placing you at the center of a warm, wet, windy cocoon.

This kitchen was the first one I spent time in, and that overheated stove of a kitchen was the first place I learned what the heart of a home was. Incidentally, this was also where I learned that clichés are overused because they are embedded in the truth. There can truly be too many chefs in the kitchen (I resent every chef besides myself—most of the time, more than me is far too many). If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen, especially out of my childhood one—no one needs a fainting spell, and you're unlikely to be revived in the heat of the day in Dar es Salaam, anyway.

I have since become attached to kitchens. Whether they be beautiful and large with plenty of light and well ventilated with cool air pouring in, or like mine.

Here as a senior in college, I am a renter of a miniscule, unventilated kitchen. Nestled at the back of the apartment, the kitchen allows for few frills. There is a large refrigerator, which on most days stands barely filled. A box of wine, some Tupperware with dinners I have made and not finished, and a re-sealable bag of shredded Mexican fiesta cheese (the classy kind that costs the least), and various sauces. The freezer holds an ice cream cake that comes out for days of sorrow or celebration, and bags of frozen vegetables that make frequent appearances.

The kitchen is furnished with borrowed utensils, plates, bowls and cups. Of the four baking trays, three were borrowed, and one was given to me. The single pot cost four dollars and some change, and my roommate and I split the cost evenly between the two of us.

This tiny kitchen, the heart of this home, has made for a good year. I can, where I was not able to before, make steaming bowls of pasta, of pilaf, or recreate the stinging scent of home with my box of masala. I can bake my own bread, butter it, and dip it into my chai. I

can stir fry my vegetables in olive oil, I can boil rice with butter and salt for comfort, and I can drip layers of love into my apple crumble.

And yet, when I set aside my two tablespoons of flour, two teaspoons of butter, and two cups of milk – I am unsteady. The sauce brings me home, a taste of the dinners that my mother put together day after day, and so I keep in pursuit of it.

One day I'll be able to create my mother's kitchen on my tongue, reveling in the flavors that will live on with me as memories. I will have wide arches crowning my counters and stove like my grandmother's kitchen, letting air find its way through the house, sending smells through the home and out to sea. The countertops will be empty, save for a mixer, so I can beat my doughs and roll them out onto the glossy granite. Barstools will sit opposite my counter, so I can watch my young family—so my family can watch me. We will laugh as I hand over bowls of cookie dough to “taste,” as the dough slowly disappears into small, hungry mouths.

I will whip up a batch of béchamel, and we will bring our pasta filled bowls to the edge of the porch. I will tell my children that their grandmother taught me how to make this sauce in a faraway kitchen from a long-ago time in humid Dar es Salaam.