

MAGIC SOUP



HARVEY
SILVERMAN

THERE WAS NEVER ANY DOUBT OF THE therapeutic properties of chicken soup; its healing powers were made clear with both verbal and non-verbal assurances. I certainly felt better after a bowlful; the hot steam rising in a gentle waft that soothed congested nostrils, the yellow globules of fat afloat and following dreamlike random paths, the palliation of throat discomfort with each spoonful, the wonderful taste. Above all, the certainty of my mom whose omniscience was, to a child, unquestioned gave no hint of “maybe” or “I hope.”

Over time, certain details have become evident. There is no tachyphylaxis with chicken soup. Years of use, bowl after bowl totaling in the hundreds or even thousands do not lessen its effects. Old men, hunched over the bowl, wearing tattered cardigan sweaters and displaying wispy unkempt beards receive as much relief as when they were boys at mother’s table.

The soup must be homemade; a liquid made from a chicken flavored bouillon cube or something from a can is a laughable therapeutic failure. It must be served hot, from a pot that is at the boil. And the soup must be taken properly. There is no place for etiquette during treatment. The patient sits over the bowl, face inches above the soup so the steam is captured in the respiratory system. The spoon should be large and move in a methodical rhythmic pattern from bowl to mouth, perhaps with the occasional pause to allow a blow or two. Otherwise there is no stopping until the bowl has been emptied.

Chicken soup is prepared with the expectation of its salubrity. Its making involves a certain amount of ritual—the cleaning of the chicken, the skimming of the initial debris that appears in a float of foam, the cutting of the vegetables, and so forward through to its serving. Ritual becomes ceremony, and as ceremony often does, it invests its object with special significance. A significance from which arise magical qualities.

THE CEREMONY OF CHICKEN SOUP, THAT which generates the anticipation of its ameliorative property, rests upon countless pots of soup produced by countless mothers. The ceremony of many yesterdays forms the foundation of that of today. Years ago my dad recalled his own experience as a child in the 1920s, a recounting of a process that permits today’s soup pharmacists to follow more efficient, if less rich, methods.

Chicken was not prepackaged or prepared. The lady of the house went to the local chicken store where live chickens were for sale and chose a nice plump hen of five or six pounds that was ritually slaughtered by an orthodox person with appropriate prayer.

Plucking came next. Many chicken stores had someone available to do this job, perhaps a widow or other person of meager means who earned a small sum for the service. Sometimes, though, the lady of the house would do the plucking herself so as to retain the best downy feathers to be used in making pillows or comforters.

More ritual. The chicken was eviscerated and cut into quarters. The liver and giblets

were set aside, the entrails fed to the family's cat. Sometimes immature egg yolks were found and were likewise set aside to be added to the soup as a particular delicacy. The bird was then set on a special board next to the sink and sprinkled with a coarse salt to draw out any remaining blood that then drained into the sink over the course of an hour or so. This process was koshering.

The feet and the neck were set aside to be used to make fricassee. Sometimes the skin from the neck was removed and stuffed with breadcrumbs, chicken fat, and spices, and then roasted and served as a course at dinner.

Meanwhile, much of the fat and fatty portions of skin was removed and set into a pot on the stove for rendering. When ready, the chicken fat was poured off and saved for use in cooking, or when cooled and solidified might be spread on a piece of rye bread, sprinkled with a bit of salt, perhaps a small piece of garlic or onion, and eaten as a well appreciated snack. The pieces of chicken skin left over from the rendering were often served as an appetizer with chopped onion or hardboiled egg.

The prepared chicken pieces were placed in the soup pot and water, celery, carrots, lima beans, and parsnip added. While the soup cooked on the stove, often using coal or wood as the fuel, the lady of the house rolled out dough to be cut into noodles to be served with the soup.

Ritual became ceremony by means of the manner in which all this was served. The house would have been cleaned for it would be the Sabbath Eve. At dusk ritual candles had been lit and stood in a corner and produced a soft and warm glow. The table was set with better china and a clean tablecloth. There was a bottle of wine and a special cup into which it was poured, and a braided sweet

bread that was covered with an embroidered napkin. The family was cleaned and polished as the father recited the prayers. The cares and problems of the previous days were set aside as the meal began.

MY OWN FIRST ATTEMPT AT MAKING chicken soup failed. I was by then an adult, away from home, and all seemed simple enough. A chicken cooked in a pot with the appropriate vegetables—carrot, onion, celery—a bit of salt and pepper. Yet the soup was terrible, barely tasting of chicken and not worth eating. At my next visit home I recounted my sad results and sought my mom's chicken soup wisdom.

She was clearly pleased that I had thought enough of the power of chicken soup to have turned to it as therapy for the young lady in my life who had been afflicted with cough and congestion. It was, in a sense, a tradition handed down and carried on. But only in a sense. My soup was nothing like the soup with which I had grown up, the soup that had salved the sufferings of colds, flus, and the like.

"You should put in a handful of dried limas. And cut up a parsnip too."

Parsnips? I never ate parsnips.

"It makes a sweeter soup."

And then my mom shared the secret. It was almost as if she were reluctant to do so. Her soup was legendary. Not just at our home but at the dinners with extended family she loved to host.

She added bouillon powder! And she told me that "all the women" do that. She had been doing it for years. She showed me her bottle of chicken bouillon powder and gave me an extra jar to take home.

A combination of practice and bouillon eventually resulted in my own soup becoming a favorite whenever our kids were ill. I told

them firmly in a strong and determined voice, exuding as much certainty as I could muster, that the soup would make them feel better. While I hoped it would do so, I had no qualms about invoking a bit of placebo power as well. It remained a requested and welcomed treatment for as long as they lived at home.

SOMETIME LATER, AFTER THE KIDS WERE grown and on their own, a son called to ask

how to make the soup that he would serve to the young lady now in his life whose misery with a cold he wished to lessen. My detailed instruction delivered, his results were successful. He reported a salutary outcome and sent a picture of the patient bent over the bowl in proper position.

I was gratified to know that the torch—or more properly the chicken—had been passed. ❖

Chicken Soup with Dumplings

Use a whole or split chicken breast with the bone in OR the leftovers of a roast chicken--the breast, legs, and wings. Put the chicken in a large pot. Add chopped carrots, celery, and onion in whatever proportions you prefer. I usually use 3 to 5 carrots, 2 stalks of celery with some leaves attached (that's the best part), and a medium to large sweet onion. Add salt and coarsely ground black pepper to your liking. I also add a couple shakes of garlic powder. Add 2 or 3 quarts of cold water. Bring it to a boil and then simmer for 60 to 90 minutes until the chicken is thoroughly cooked and the vegetables are tender. Add more water if necessary; the chicken and vegetables should be generously covered with water, and you want plenty of that wonderful broth in which to cook the dumplings. Turn off the heat and remove the chicken; be sure to take out all the bones. Let the chicken cool until you are able to handle it, then pick all the meat off the bones and chop it into small- to medium-sized pieces. Put the meat back into the soup and bring it once again to a simmer. To make dumplings, use a fork to mix 1 and 1/2 cups of flour, 2 eggs, 1/2 cup water, a generous dash of salt, and a 1/4 teaspoon of baking powder. The dough need not be smooth, but it must be thick enough that it won't drip from a spoon. If necessary, add a bit more flour. Then, use a small spoon to grab a lima bean-sized piece of dough. Place the spoon into the soup so the dumpling falls off the spoon. Repeat until the dough is used up. Work quickly. When finished, simmer the soup for another 5 minutes and then take out one of the dumplings and let it cool so you can try it. If it feels like dough in your mouth, cook another minute. Dumplings should not be mushy. To take a cue from pasta, they should feel "al dente." Serve it up! Add more salt and pepper if desired.

My favorite thing to cook on a cold snowy day.

--Christine Cote