Which Came First—The Chicken or the Soup?



Neolithic remains suggest humans may have supped their first soups 30,000 years ago, perhaps from meat boiled in its skin. How else to nourish the toothless elders whose skeletons emerged from Neanderthal graves? Pots would come later, as would chickens, which were bred from wild game and flourished in Egyptian farmyards around 3000 B.C.E. A knowledge of chicken husbandry passed from Egyptians and Persians to the Greeks. The Romans later gave chickens and (for their perceived machismo) roosters elevated status both cultural and culinary.

The Greeks and Romans in turn inspired much of what happens around Jewish tables today, including the very idea of ritual dinners like the seder and Shabbat, according to Ken Ovitz, culinary historian and author of *The Israel Seder Haggadah*. Chicken had largely disappeared from the Middle Eastern table, in fact, until the Romans reintroduced it. Poultry made sense for both desert and urban cultivation, given the birds' catholic food tastes, their minimal need for grazing and living space and their tolerance of hot weather. In Rome's colonies, "Jews ate them more than gentiles, who also ate pork in large quantities," Ovitz says.

After the fall of Rome, chicken remained central to the diet of Eastern Jewry but dropped off the European Jewish menu for a few hundred years. Chicken soup "first came to prominence in Ashkenazic circles after the revival of chicken raising in Europe in the 15th century," says Gil Marks, author of *The World of Jewish Cooking*. In a nostalgic account of his Polish-Ukrainian shtetl Podhaitse, Alexander Kimel recalls that "food was cheap ... a sack of potatoes was 75 groshen and a live chicken cost 75 groshen." Wealth in the Old Country was measured by how often a man could afford a chicken for Shabbat.

Eastern Europeans are not the only connoisseurs of chicken and its soupy golden broth. Mimi Sheraton writes in her *The Whole World Loves Chicken Soup* about its many geographic variations.

While Eastern Europeans threw in egg noodles, root vegetables and matzo balls, Colombians incorporate capers, avocado and sweet corn. Moving East, traditional Korean chicken soup combines dried jujube fruit, ginger, garlic and glutinous rice with chicken stock, while evaporated milk is added to Philippine chicken soup for richness of flavor.

As for its medicinal properties, chicken soup was already touted as a curative in the writings of the 11th-century Persian physician Avicenna, and the 12th-century Jewish scholar and physician Moses Maimonides. Soup made from fowl, wrote the Rambam in his *Medical Responsa*, "has virtue in rectifying corrupted humours," and is especially effective for convalescence, emergent leprosy and asthma. He even offered some (fairly obvious) cooking tips—advising, for example, against using a scrawny bird. By 1500, chicken soup with noodles emerged not only as the first course for Friday evening Ashkenazic dinner, according to Marks, but "a tasty way of dealing with colds."

Doctors of Tel Aviv University's School of Medicine wrote that chicken soup meets criteria for classification as an "essential drug." The elixir may never undergo a randomized clinical trial, they argue, chiefly because "depriving the control group of chicken soup would, in our opinion, be unethical."

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Curious to see if the soup was truly a universal panacea, modern scientists conducted a study, published in the medical journal *Chest*. They found that compared to cold water and hot water, chicken soup was most helpful in battling colds. Chicken broth, it turns out, contains an amino acid that thins mucus and unclogs stuffy noses. Other studies have shown that chicken soup acts as an anti-inflammatory providing some sinus relief.

No double-blind trial has tested the effectiveness of the so-called "Jewish penicillin." "However, we feel that sufficient observational and anecdotal evidence has accumulated over the centuries to make the requirement for such a trial superfluous," write doctors Abraham Ohry and Jenni Tsafrir of Tel Aviv University's Sackler School of Medicine. Their 1999 letter to the journal of the Canadian Medical Association contends, not entirely facetiously, that chicken soup meets World Health Organization criteria for classification as an "essential drug," based on 2,000 years of "evidence-based" results.

The elixir may never undergo a randomized clinical trial, they argue, not only because it would be too difficult for scientists to settle on a definitive recipe but chiefly because "depriving the control group of chicken soup would, in our opinion, be unethical." As to adverse effects, the physicians conclude, "while you might choke on a chicken bone, the anecdotal evidence advocating the benefits of chicken soup far outweighs that describing its shortcomings." —*Mandy Katz*

Quick Chicken Noodle Soup
Courtesy, The Gluten Free Girl
glutenfreegirl.blogspot.com

1 carrot, finely chopped
2 stalks celery, cut in half lengthwise, then chopped
1/2 onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, smashed and minced
1/2 teaspoon rosemary, minced
1 tablespoon olive oil
3 cups chicken stock
1 chicken breast, already cooked, chopped into bite-sized pieces
1/2 cup gluten-free noodles

1. Heat a saucepan, then add the olive oil. Sauté the carrot, celery stalks, onion and garlic together, on medium heat. Stir occasionally, making sure they do not burn. When the vegetables start to smell warm and autumnal, and the onion has become translucent, add the rosemary to the mix. Stir and let the flavors mingle.
2. Add the chicken stock and bring the heat to medium-high. Let the stock and vegetables simmer and dance, until the stock has come to a gentle boil. Let it continue to boil for about ten minutes, to roll the flavors in.
3. Add the cooked chicken to the pan and let the soup cook for another five minutes or so. At the end, add the gluten-free noodles. Check for a soft bite on the noodles, after about five minutes. Add your favorite salt to the soup, stir, and serve.

Serves one, over the course of a long afternoon of sniffling.

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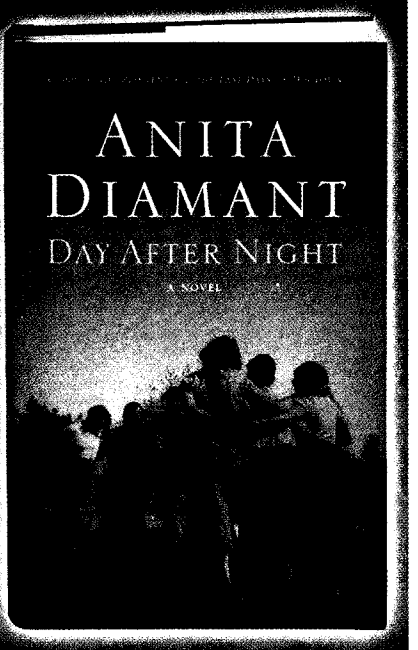
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