



Soups

As revenge, I make this soup.

BAT WING SOUP. I've never heard so many adverse reactions to the name of a recipe in my life. Dozens of people have eaten it, found it delicious and some brave souls have even asked for the recipe. (I have found it best not to tell them my name for this Chinese mushroom soup as I'm ladling into bowls. Rather I leave it for when the seventh bottle has been drunk and everyone is declining the proffered cheese platter for the second time.)

If you want to be precise, the mushroom's real name is Wood Ear Fungus, closely related to Jew's Ear Fungus.

This makes a perfect fast soup because you need only soak the slimy mushrooms for about half an hour and they expand lovingly to the exact consistency of bat wings.

How do I know what bat wings look like? Answer: I was terrorized by them as a kid when we went to stay with the McCorquodales at Mangrove Mountain. It was a small property with a small wooden dacha near the dam — which we called The Shack. It belonged to one of the hundreds of rels on my father's side and every year there we would have a Gathering of the Clan.

As the cottage was small, the kiddies had the privilege of sleeping out on the veranda. Without mosquito nets, close to nature. Come sunset the little children were supposed to go to bed while the older children and adults caroused and frolicked around the barbecue elsewhere. I was sent to bed in the first batch with my brother and sister who would drop off to sleep in seconds, leaving me to lie awake in that narrow bunk bed staring at the sunset and waiting for the dreaded shapes to emerge.

The first time I saw them I thought they were birds. But then one of my more enlightened cousins told me they were fruit bats and they would swoop down and attack small children in the dead of night.

Being gullible I believed him. Being bats they swooped.

Not thousands as I claimed in a loud bellow, waking up siblings and cousins and causing one parent to amble over and see what the screeching was all about, but one. It had sticky claws and clammy skin and was frankly hideous. I haven't been able to see a dracula film ever since.

As revenge, I make this soup.

Bat Wing Soup

<i>4 large</i>	dried Wood Ear mushrooms
<i>1 tbsp</i>	fresh ginger, grated
<i>4</i>	spring onions (both parts), sliced
<i>1/4 cup</i>	thick bacon, diced
<i>1/4 cup</i>	sherry
<i>1/2 cup</i>	soy sauce
<i>4 cups</i>	cold water

If you have a wok, this is best, otherwise use a large enough pot to cook the soup. Soak the mushrooms in lukewarm water for about 20 minutes. When they are soft and rubbery, remove them from water, slice them into thin strips and set aside.

Grate your fresh ginger. Buy up big whenever it comes into stock and freeze it. That way you will always have it available. Simply remove it from the freezer, no need to defrost, and grate it. Have the green and white parts of the spring onion ready, in two separate piles. And mix together the soy and sherry.

Heat the wok or saucepan. When it is almost smoking, add 3 tablespoons of vegetable oil and add the diced bacon. Let it cook, stirring continually for about a minute, add the white part of the green onion, stir, then the ginger and finally the mushrooms. Stir for about a minute, then pour the soy and sherry carefully in around the sides of the wok. Add the cold water and bring to the boil and then turn the heat down to simmer for about 15 minutes. Test to see whether you need more seasoning.

Add the green parts of the spring onion to the soup and serve.

SOUP DU JOUR. Sounds kind of dull, doesn't it. It usually is. Remember all those years as a student when you decided to lash out and go to a real restaurant for lunch instead of eating at the typical *Stolovaya*, or cafeteria.

Seated in a clean room, a crisp linen napkin, real cutlery, you scan that menu lovingly. What will it be? Brochettes de Langoustine, the fillet of beef with new potatoes or the lamb shanks with garlic sauce? The waiter silently hovers, you check the prices again and smilingly enquire: "What is the soup today?"

Such a letdown. It's never going to taste as good as lamb shanks no matter what you do.

Having said that, driving into the city this cold morning from the dacha at the writers' village of Peredelkino — pothole, truck, pothole, truck — all I could think of was how wonderful it would be to sit down to a bowl of hot fish soup, crusty french bread and a large serving of garlic mayonnaise.

A simple, simple dish that would make you forget how gray the weather was and how little culinary gratification we get all day.

The soup is the easy part, (except for the fresh fish, but that's another story) it's the garlic mayonnaise that is the treat. People who don't like garlic won't have any fun with this recipe; which is a shame because not only does garlic taste great, it protects you from plague and possession by devils as well.

This dish is a Provençal one, and the *aïoli* will make two cups. That may seem a lot, but it keeps in the fridge for a few days, if you ever have any left over. Actually leftover *aïoli* is a contradiction in terms: its too delicious not to eat in one sitting.

If you have scanned the repertoire of Moscow recipes you will find plenty of fish dishes — most dating from the last century. It is a terrible shame that although fish can be bought from *rynoks* and sometimes those dreaded fish stores, they invariably conjure up images of agonizing bouts of food poisoning rather than fresh poisson. It is safer to buy frozen and enjoy your fresh fish somewhere else.

Bourride Fish Soup

1 kg	white fish fillets
4 cups	white wine
1	leek (white part only), chopped
2 medium	onions, finely chopped
2	cloves
2 medium	carrots, chopped
1 tsp each	salt and ground black pepper
A long slice	orange zest

Bring to the boil a liter of water and all of the above ingredients. Poach fish for about 15 minutes. Thickly slice good white bread and toast carefully. Place the soup in a deep bowl with a slice of the toast and spoon over the garlic mayonnaise.

5 cloves	garlic
1 tsp	salt
5	egg yolks
1 cup	olive oil
1/2 cup	sunflower oil
1 tsp	lemon juice

Grind the garlic and salt to a paste. Whisk the eggs together in a medium sized ceramic or metal bowl and start adding the olive oil. Add the oil very, very slowly. Drop by drop at the beginning into the egg yolks and whisk methodically. Keep whisking, adding more and more oil gradually until the mixture is thickening nicely.

Once all the olive oil has been absorbed, gradually whisk in the sunflower oil.

Once you have a plump mayonnaise, add the garlic paste. The finer the paste the easier this next process will be. Whisk for another few minutes so the garlic is well combined, taste and add a squeeze of lemon and a little salt and spoon over the toast.

YEARS FROM NOW you will thank me for this.

Hell, why wait. Thank me now. I have just invented a use for sweet Russian champagne.

It had been a trying day. Or in Moscow parlance: A Trying Day. One of those hungry days when all you can do is think about hot bubble baths, soothing music and enclosing yourself in a warm fug. Preferably a 10 P.M. fug that has involved a warm filling meal and not hearing about tragedies or what gurgled down your drain pipes the night before.

These thoughts appeared around 10 A.M. which, for a Monday, was a bad sign. I sat at my computer, fair dribbling with hunger, as my dear fellow office companion mentioned great cassoulets he had eaten the year before.

Cassoulets — those rib-sticking French casseroles adrip with beans and great slabs of pork and herbs — were the subject of the day.

We had a brief distraction with ten hours of work, but the subject remained. By the end of the day there was no choice but to go home, throw myself into the kitchen and cook.

Slight problem with the supply cupboard. No beans. Well, not the right sort. But I was not to be dissuaded. I had green beans, I had pork and I was hungry. In went the ingredients, in went the wooden spoon and there I was, poised to add the water.

But I couldn't do it. Have you noticed how pungent Moscow water is these days? Noticed how shampoo and cream rinse may try their hardest, but all you end up with is hard hair? How could I possibly do this to a cassoulet?

The eyes ranged around the kitchen and spotted the thing that has been lurking around the place for about eight months which begged to be consumed, but I could never muster the courage. It was a bottle of very *sladky* (sweet) Russian champagne.

Still it would beat water I said as it gugged in.

And it did. Truly amazing.

A drier champagne would have been better, but then brut champagne always is. If you would rather a pasta sauce than a soup, once the dish is ready, remove the largest portions of tomatoes and beans, set aside and boil the remaining liquid for about twenty minutes so that it is reduced to a thick syrup. Return the tomatoes and beans and serve over noodles.

Bubbly Bean Soup

<i>5 tbsp</i>	olive oil
<i>1 medium</i>	onion, finely chopped
<i>1 clove</i>	garlic, sliced
<i>1/2 cup</i>	bacon, chopped into cubes
<i>1 small tin</i>	tomatoes
<i>1 cup</i>	green beans
<i>2 tsp</i>	thyme
<i>1 bottle</i>	champagne
<i>Plus</i>	pepper and salt

Heat the oil in a heavy based saucepan and fry the onion and garlic for about ten minutes on medium heat. Add the ham and fry briefly, then add the tomatoes, the green beans, thyme and the bottle of champagne. Bring to the boil then simmer for about half an hour.

Check the soup carefully to ensure it is not too sweet. Add a good grind of pepper and salt. Serve hot.

I HAVE BECOME BREATHLESS with desire. It distracts me when I am awake and prevents me falling asleep. I have survived without it for 29 years, but I cannot do without it anymore.

Pleasures of the flesh are nothing compared to this. It costs 350,000 rubles, I saw it for the first time last week. I went there again today and it hasn't been sold. Cream and blue, etched in gold it is an Austrian Imperial tea service, ten teacups, twelve saucers (of course) a sugar bowl and tea pot. I will die if I do not possess it. Just as the little girl in Willie Wonker and the Chocolate Factory would say: "I want it Daddy and I want it now."

The *Kommissiony* — an antique store that sells goods on commission — is just five minutes walk from my door, nestled snugly on Ulitsa Tverskaya, between an art gallery and a stationer's store. With a few kiosks thrown in, why would you yearn for a shopping mall?

With winter stalking, objets d'art in *Kommissionis* are going to serve as one of my main sources of beauty over the next few months. Because let's be honest: Venice, yes, Copenhagen, definitely, Tallinn, at a pinch and on a good day. But Moscow, no. Not a conventional beauty as far as cities go. You need to find your pleasure in small things.

Kommissionis are beautiful. Like Moscow itself you get a lot of kitsch, a lot of sorry horrors and there in the middle something that will make you gasp, make you scrabble for rubles, make you mad with lust.

And what of food? Food is a mere distraction from all of this. How can you think about cooking elaborate meals when your mind is pre-occupied with such vital thoughts as: How can I assemble 350,000 rubles in a city without automatic teller machines? How can I justify spending so much money on something I am bound to break, cannot export and will probably tire of six months from now?

As punishment I will wait one more week before I visit the *kommissioni* again. Hopefully someone will put me out of my misery and buy it. And in the meantime, as punishment, it is bread and water for me. Well, the French version of the above: sensible soup.

French Onion Soup

<i>5 tbsp</i>	butter
<i>2 cups</i>	onions, coarsely chopped
<i>2 cups</i>	onions, thinly sliced
<i>2 cups</i>	green onions, finely chopped
<i>5 cups</i>	water
<i>1/2 cup</i>	dry white wine
<i>6 thick slices</i>	white bread
<i>2 tbsp</i>	olive oil
<i>1 cup</i>	Gruyère cheese, grated

Preheat the oven to 180° Celsius. Those of you who have swimming goggles, now is the time to use them. It will save a lot of tears when you cut up this many onions in one go.

In a large saucepan melt the butter over a very low heat. Add all the onions, stir well so they are coated, cover the pot and cook, stirring every now and then for about 30 minutes. Keep the heat low and you will have the best results. Once you see most of the onions are transparent, add the water and the wine. Bring the mixture to the boil, uncover the pot and then let the soup simmer, with barely a winkle of a bubble for another half hour.

While the soup is cooking, brush the bread with good olive oil and bake in the oven for about 10 minutes. To serve this dish place a slice of golden toast in the bottom of each bowl, carefully ladle the soup over the bread, then garnish with a generous amount of cheese on top.

A FRIEND OF MINE THINKS that if you rented the Crimea to the Italians for 20 years, the place would be paradise. The scenery is already spectacular; it's just the stodgy food that makes one's stomach and heart sink.

I have just come back from a ten day trip there and the sight, not to mention the taste, of *kotlety* and mashed potatoes three meals a day, was less than encouraging. Admittedly we gorged ourselves on the tastiest, plumpest, sweetest cherries on earth — about a kilogram per person per day. But what about the rest? Where was the goat's cheese? Where were the tempting vegetables and spicy meats? Where were the gourmet meals on the terraces of the cafes, beside the sea?

Fear not foodies. In ten days we did eat well. Twice. At the same restaurant near Simferopol and you may have guessed the type of food we ate if you have ever been down there. The restaurant was Tartar. The meal was delicious and it made the six-hour wait for the plane back to Moscow all the more bearable.

The manager and waitress was Vinera, an enterprising young Tartar woman who didn't look as though any of the Simferopol toughs would give her any grief. She had us seated, appraised our haggard looks and promptly suggested soup. "*Lagman*," she said knowingly, drawing out those vowels so the dish sounded like *Laaagmaaan*, and disappeared.

"Well it has to be better than *Borscht*," I muttered darkly. Looking hopefully towards the kitchen. And it was.

Oily and spicy it was the best thing we had eaten all week. Naturally I had to get the recipe. I boldly went into the kitchen where an army of Tartar women were shouting over three blackened cauldrons that would have impressed Macbeth. Vinera hustled me out and sat down to explain the secret.

The only trouble was, she didn't know the name of the spices in Russian — just in Tartar. *Zra*? What was *zra*?

Back into the kitchen we went where the bags of spices were standing in a corner. She rustled about in a bag and came up with some seeds. *Zra* she beamed, probably thinking I was an idiot child not to know cumin seeds when I saw them. And just so I wouldn't get it wrong with the next spice she presented me with samples.

I put them in my wallet for safe keeping, and now every time I reach for rubles I snag my fingers on jagged edges of star anise.

Lagman Tartar Soup

<i>2 cups</i>	thick noodles (avoid spaghetti)
<i>1/2 cup</i>	thick bacon, cut into cubes
<i>1/2 cup</i>	beef or lamb, cooked
<i>2 medium</i>	potatoes, cubed
<i>2 medium</i>	onions, finely chopped
<i>2 medium</i>	carrots, diced
<i>1</i>	green bell pepper, cubed
<i>1</i>	squash or courgette, cubed
<i>1/4 head</i>	small cabbage, shredded
<i>2 tbsp</i>	tomato paste (or 2 med. tomatoes, chopped)
<i>1 heaped tsp</i>	coriander seeds, crushed
<i>1 heaped tsp</i>	star anise, crushed
<i>1 heaped tsp</i>	cumin seeds, crushed
<i>1 bunch</i>	coriander leaves, well washed
<i>1 small bunch</i>	dill, snipped into small lengths

The noodles should be cooked in a separate pot. Try to have them cooking while the soup is being made, that way you can combine them both piping hot at the end.

The ingredients should be cooked in a heavy pot in this order: first the bacon, then the meat, onions, potatoes and carrots, bell peppers, squash or courgette and finally the cabbage. Keep the heat on a medium flame and stir well.

Next add the tomatoes or tomato paste and then the dried spices. Cover with water and bring to the boil and when the potato is cooked, so too is the soup.

Add the cooked noodles to the soup, then just before serving add the dill and coriander.

DEAR S:

Far be it from me to sound like a commercial for tennis shoes, but this may be the recipe that will inspire you to cook dinner tonight. My recipes are too complex you say. Why not write something us non-cooks understand? Well here it is: Its called "get in that kitchen and just do it."

To make it easy, here is the simplest recipe in the repertoire. It requires tomatoes and garlic, oil and wine. No complaints that my dishes call for trips to five different stores around the city plus the *rynok* with this meal. One-stop shopping. One dish.

Tomato Garlic Soup

5 <i>tabsp</i>	olive oil
1 <i>whole bulb</i>	garlic, peeled and finely chopped
2 <i>large tins (800g)</i>	tomatoes
1-1/2 <i>cups</i>	white wine

That's it. No quarter teaspoon of elk horn extract, no dab cleaving or peeling. No salt, no pepper, no fuss. In fact you can't go wrong. This dish will be ready in 40 minutes.

Choose the biggest saucepan you have. Add 3 tablespoons olive oil and gently, gently cook the garlic until it is soft.

Burning garlic is what most people do by cooking it too high, so don't be one of the crowd — keep the heat on very low. Take your time. Finish the crossword while it's cooking — stirring every now and then, read that outdated *Herald Tribune*, check the E-mail.

When the garlic is very soft, add the tomatoes, breaking them up so there are no large pieces, and pour in the wine.

Stir, put on the lid. Put the heat way down so the dish simmers — just a bubble or two winking the surface — and that's it. You will have time to set the table and uncork the wine. And contemplate how simple that all was.