

A Personal Best Bean Soup

I backed into bean soup today, not literally of course, but I approached the concept from another perspective. I started with *cassoulet*, a superbly satisfying dish in which the flavors of the ingredients, all added at different times over the course of long, gentle simmering, blend to produce a miraculous whole. The bean soup, a lovely dividend, is the best bean soup I've ever had.

I suspect my arrival at the bean soup is a product of my philosophy that there are no "leftovers", there are only "opportunities." Nobody at our house has ever had to eat a dinner of microwave-reheated remnants of last night's dinner, arranged in lonely unrelated mounds on the plate much in the guise in which they had been served previously. Recombinations and new combinations with other foods turn snippets of this and that into comfort food for body and soul. Small amounts of crisp-cooked green beans become part of a composed salad for a first course. A bit of roast salmon, mashed and mixed with mayonnaise and one of any number of fresh herbs and spread on a round of French bread makes a delicious quick *tartine* to go with a drink before dinner. I no longer worry about buying just the right amount of something. I enjoy having a little extra to play with. When I look at the palette of flavors, textures, colors and scents waiting for me in the fridge I'm ready to be creative in a way that refreshes my brain after a day spent researching in dusty tomes and records.

But what about that bean soup? How did I get there? Cassoulet was a clue because I had made it a couple of days before and all I had to do was add liquid. It was the cassoulet itself that was so much fun to produce (and which now rests in three heavy plastic bags deep in my freezer awaiting reprise).

Cassoulet can be made with roasted or smoked meats. For a fine recipe, go directly to Julia Child et al. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* Vol. I. It takes some time to make a cassoulet. A weekend day is perfect. What a great excuse to read a good book while your project is simmering!

Really great cassoulet, however, begins with *confit* that wonderfully garlicky, herby, satiny product of cooking meat or poultry very slowly, totally immersed in fat (preferably that of the animal) Cassoulet is a gift from the Gascons in Southwest France. It's a survival of an ancient method of preserving that was first used 30 generations or more ago.

Confit is a separate project, another of those delicious weekend excuses to read a good book while your project is bubbling gently. Julia has a recipe for confit too. Look under "Goose, preserved." We've made confit with duck and pork, but geese are pricey so I save the fun of cooking a goose for an occasional holiday dinner. And what about all that fat? You retrieve a piece of confit from the fat and wipe the fat off, you don't *eat* it. Could you do a confit of chicken in schmalz? I believe you could.

On cassoulet day I gently cook white beans (Great Northerns are excellent in cassoulet) in a generous-sized cast-iron Dutch oven until they are just tender, then I submerge chunks of confit and coarsely chopped onion in the bean mixture to and bring to a simmer. The Dutch oven then goes into a 325° F oven. Perhaps an hour and a half later I add some smoked sausage, or again I might not. Different styles of cassoulet have different ingredients. Some even have lamb. After about another hour and a half I fold in a little tomato puree or tomato concentrate (the good stuff that comes in tubes) and three or four large cloves of garlic, peeled and sliced. (Garlic mellows as it cooks. The cassoulet will not scream "GARLIC" at you.) Then I top the whole thing with good dried bread crumbs and return the cassoulet to the oven. The top browns a bit and then I stir the crumbs in and let the top brown some more. Some traditions say you must do this seven times. I'm usually too hungry to do all seven.

As for the bean soup, today I simply "loosened up" the cassoulet with chicken stock (because I had some around — otherwise water would have been fine) until it was, well, a soup. But what a soup!

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