

Soup of the Evening, Beautiful Soup

All ought to be made to taste the soup . . .

—Grimm's Fairy Tales

THIS is not that, and that certainly is not this, and at the same time an oyster stew is not stewed, and although they are made of the same things and even cooked almost the same way, an oyster soup should never be called a stew, nor a stew soup. It is perfectly clear, if you respect oysters and the words about them, and are annoyed by home economics articles, complete with soup recipes, which begin, "Dress up your oyster stew . . ."

An oyster stew is made quickly, about as fast as the hand can follow the mind or the mind the eye. Oyster soup takes longer, can cost much or little, and pleases some people even more than it bores others.

The great difference between it and the stew, probably, is that the soup has a thickening in it of flour or crumbs or egg, or, as one precise chef says, "Rice! Never flour or cornstarch!" It is richer, and yet oddly enough is often served before a large meal, whereas oyster stew is considered by even the heaviest gourmands as a meal in itself.

An inexpensive soup which tastes more like oysters than its recipe would lead you to suspect, especially if you have been reading older rules that call nonchalantly for quarts and pails, is the following, found in a newspaper:

CREAM OF OYSTER SOUP

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter	1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons flour	$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon celery salt
1 quart milk	dash pepper
$\frac{1}{2}$ pint oysters (1)	

Melt butter in top of double boiler, remove from heat, and blend in flour. Add milk and stir constantly over direct heat until mixture boils and thickens slightly. Add seasonings and place over boiling water; cover. Remove any bits of shell from oysters. Chop oysters, using chopping bowl; add with liquor to hot mixture, heat thoroughly, approximately ten minutes, and serve piping hot with crisp crackers or buttered toast rings and strips. Serves six.

This recipe, especially when boxed on a newspaper page with its accompanying photograph, smudged but still modern in the Let-Us-Keep-Our-Kitchens-Gay manner, is almost actively abhorrent. It represents, with its efficiency, its lack of imagination, its very practicability, everything that Brillat-Savarin, in his forthright manner, would have belched at gastronomically.

And yet it can be a good soup. Basically it is well constructed, and, most valuable, it allows for certain extremely personal deviations: a pinch of fresh marjoram buds by Mrs. Zanzibar Woodbury, herbologist extraordinary of the East Dingle-Dell Garden Club; a dash of dry sherry by Y. Erpington Grubb, *bon-vivant-emeritus* of the English department of Stokes-on-the-Hudson College for Young Gentlemen; a rousing grind of fresh pepper by Charles (Chub) Bye, late of the Left Bank and later still of assorted Southern and Far Western "artists' colonies." The lady and the professor and the chubby yearner have reason; any addition, or all, to this sterile recipe can do small harm, and at best make it yet plainer that basically it is good enough to stand well-nigh incredible assaults, even to using tinned oysters.

Other rules for soup are less amenable. One which sounds almost like the newspaper recipe, and comes from the *New England Cook Book*, could no more be made with Number 2 cans of steamed Willapoints than Flying Fortresses with match-boxes . . . and as for imaginative additions, a flick of paprika is probably as far as even the most sacrilegious gourmet should let himself go:

OYSTER SOUP

1 quart oysters	2 tablespoons flour
3 cups milk	1½ teaspoon salt
1 cup cream	¼ teaspoon pepper
3 tablespoons butter	1 tablespoon grated onion

Melt the butter and stir in the flour and blend well. Slowly add the milk, stirring all the time, then the cream and seasonings, and grated onion. Keep hot over a low flame. Bring the oysters to a boil in their own liquor. Cook about five minutes or until the edges curl. Strain. Add oysters to the milk stock, heat about five minutes without boiling. Serve immediately.

Some books, less blunt in their manner than the austere New England pamphlet, call their soups bisques, and in general such a change of wording indicates either richer ingredients or a more finicky rule of procedure, with perhaps a few words of kitchen French thrown casually in with the English. Equally in general, such recipes are excellent.

One of them, given in Merle Armitage's *Fit for a King*, is a good model for all such rules:

OYSTER BISQUE

Make a roux of butter and flour. Add a large onion finely chopped and brown the mixture. Then add a quart of boiling water, 4 dozen oysters and their liquor, a generous square of butter, bay leaf, thyme, and salt and pepper. Boil this soup for twenty minutes, then remove two dozen of the oysters and chop them finely. Then pass the soup and the rest of the oysters through a sieve, mashing the oysters. Now add the chopped oysters and 4 sprigs of parsley. Serve steaming.

Mrs. William Vaughan Moody, who can always be trusted to cope with any of the finer problems of American gastronomy, also calls her soup bisque, and adds, as is her wont, a good gout of whipped cream which almost, but not quite, makes her recipe "ladies' luncheon":

OYSTER BISQUE¹

1 qt. of oysters	½ cup of cracker crumbs
1 pint of cream	onion
1 pint of milk	salt, pepper, paprika
1 cup of whipped cream	mace

Put the oysters over to heat in a dish by themselves.

Put the pint of milk and the pint of cream in a double boiler, with a sprig of mace, and half a sweet onion. Remove the onion and mace when their first flavor is imparted.

When the oysters, and the milk and cream are hot, strain out the oysters, and put the liquor into the hot milk. Throw the oysters into cold water. Skim off any froth that rises to the top of the mixture in the double boiler. Add pepper and salt to taste, ½ cup of cracker crumbs, and 1 tablespoon of sweet butter. Let all cook together for a few minutes until the soup is well blended.

Strain the water off the oysters. Dry them on a clean piece of cheesecloth. Put them into the soup and serve at once, with a tablespoon of whipped cream on each cup.

Mrs. Moody's literary style, or rather aroma, is almost as delicate as her genteel methods for making a soup taste like onion without having any onion showing in the final dish, and there are some irreverent souls who will follow her excellent rule even to putting the bisque in the cups and the whipped cream on the bisque, and then destroy her delicacy with a hearty tap of cayenne pepper over each rich melting mound. Such behavior is audacious, but in spite of evidence to the contrary, it is hard to believe that Mrs. Moody herself would not approve of it.

The recipe (or, as she called it, the receipt) set forth by Marion Harland in her *Common Sense in the Household* is, surprisingly enough, the most elaborate. Of course, in the 1870's in eastern America there was a plenitude of what that good woman winningly called "girls," along with most other housewives of our land, and even "second girls" were common in houses that today boast nothing more efficient than a vacuum cleaner and an electric dish-washer. Mrs. Harland, although much more sensible than most of her colleagues, still gauged recipes and their construction in terms of hours spent

¹ Mrs. William Vaughn Moody's *Cook Book* published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

by Irish scullery-maids rather than minutes dashed off by wives just home from the office. For that reason, as well as others, her rules are as quaint as Elizabethan diaries by now, and yet are practical, if carried out with a grain or two of that common sense she so heartily recommends:

OYSTER SOUP (NO. 2)

2 quarts of oysters	1 qt. milk
2 eggs	1 teacupful of water

Strain the liquor from the oysters into a saucepan, pour in with it the water. Season with cayenne pepper and a little salt, a teaspoonful of mingled nutmeg, mace, and cloves. When the liquor is almost boiling, add half the oysters chopped finely and boil five minutes quite briskly. Strain the soup and return to saucepan with the milk. Have ready some forcemeat balls, not larger than marbles, made of the yolks of the eggs boiled hard and rubbed to a smooth paste with a little butter, then mixed with six raw oysters chopped very finely, a little salt, and a raw egg well beaten, to bind the ingredients together. Flour your hands well and roll the forcemeat into pellets, laying them upon a cold plate, so as not to touch one another, until needed. Then put the reserved whole oysters into the hot soup, and when it begins to boil again, drop in the forcemeat marbles. Boil until the oysters "ruffle," by which time the balls will also be done.

Serve with sliced lemon and crackers. A liberal tablespoonful of butter stirred in gently at the last is an improvement.

Everyone, from Mrs. Harland to the anonymous ascetic New Englanders and back again to various extollers of the elegant bisque, agrees that Oyster Soup is something made with cream and thickening . . . and oysters, whole or chopped, fresh (God willing) or even tinned.

But there is a way to make a soup from oysters that demands only oysters. Oysters there *must* be, and for the rest, you make or even pour from a tin the best beef consommé you can get, and heat it and put in the cold washed shell-fish. Then you put an unbroken egg yolk tenderly into each soup-plate, and pour the consommé with its multitude of oysters over it, in a gentle way so that the yolk will cook a little and stay whole. That is all. It is quick, and easy, and it is good, too.