



## ENGLISH FOOD

Jane Grigson was brought up in the north-east of England, where there is a strong tradition of good eating, but it was not until many years later, when she began to spend three months of each year in France, that she became really interested in food. *Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery* was the result, exploring the wonderful range of cooked meat products on sale in even the smallest market towns. This book has also been translated into French, a singular honour for an English cookery writer.

After taking an English degree at Cambridge in 1949, Jane Grigson worked in art galleries and publishers' offices, and then as a translator. In 1966 she shared the John Florio prize (with Father Kenelm Foster) for her translation of Beccaria's *Of Crime and Punishment*. It was in 1968 that Jane Grigson began her long association with the *Observer Magazine*, for whom she wrote right up until her untimely death in 1990; *Good Things* and *Food with the Famous* are both based on these highly successful series. In 1973, *Fish Cookery* was published by the Wine and Food Society, followed by *The Mushroom Feast* (1975), a collection of recipes for cultivated, woodland, field and dried mushrooms. She received both the Glenfiddich Writer of the Year Award and the André Simon Memorial Fund Book Award for her *Vegetable Book* (1978) and for her *Fruit Book* (1982), and was voted Cookery Writer of the Year in 1977 for *English Food*. A compilation of her best recipes, *The Enjoyment of Food*, was published in 1990 with an introduction by her daughter, the cookery writer Sophie Grigson. Most of Jane Grigson's books are published in Penguin.

Jane Grigson died in March 1990. In her obituary for the *Independent*, Alan Davidson wrote that 'Jane Grigson left to the English-speaking world a legacy of fine writing on food and cookery for which no exact parallel exists... She won to herself this wide audience because she was above all a friendly writer... the most companionable presence in the kitchen; often catching the imagination with a deftly chosen fragment of history or poetry, but never failing to explain the "why" as well as the "how" of cookery'. Jane Grigson was married to the poet and critic, the late Geoffrey Grigson.

Sophie Grigson was born in 1959, the daughter of Jane and Geoffrey Grigson. She has contributed to many magazines and newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*, the *Independent*, and the *Sunday Times Magazine*. Her first book, *Food for Friends*, was published in 1987, since when she has written many cookery books, including *Sophie's Table* (1990), *Sophie Grigson's Ingredients Book* (1991) and *Eat Your Greens*, which accompanied her television series of the same name. Her latest television series, which has an accompanying book, is about herbs.

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**Jane Grigson**

With a Foreword by Sophie Grigson



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*For Geoffrey and Sophie*

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*and for my parents in whose house*

*I first learnt about  
good English food*

~~29 February 1788: We gave the company for dinner some fish and oyster sauce, a nice piece of boiled beef, a fine neck of pork roasted and apple sauce, some hashed turkey, mutton steaks, salad, etc., a wild duck roasted, fried rabbits, a plum pudding and some tartlets. Dessert, some olives, nuts, almonds and raisins and apples. The whole company were pleased with their dinner, etc. Considering we had not above three hours' notice of their coming we did very well in that short time. All of us were rather hurried on the occasion.~~

REV. JAMES WOODFORD

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# FOREWORD

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SHORTLY BEFORE HER 60TH BIRTHDAY, my mother decided that as from official retirement age, she was only going to work on things that really interested her. No more duty jobs or public appearances because she felt she ought to. She had paid her dues and her 'retirement' was to be able to concentrate purely on writing for her own pleasure. One project, long cherished, that she could now make time for was a second revision of her book *English Food*, published first in 1974 and revised once in 1979.

In the unfairly short two years of her 'retirement', Jane never stopped working – there was always so much that did interest her – even between the grim sessions of chemotherapy that failed to halt her cancer. The new *English Food* took shape, and in the last few months before her death she threw herself into the work, aware, perhaps, that time was not on her side. She almost completed it, leaving only the final chapter, 'Stuffings, Sauces & Preserves' untouched. Almost twenty years after it was first written, *English Food* remains the outstanding book on the subject. Of course, it was written by a marvellous writer. All of Jane's books are a delight to read and to linger over before (and after) heading, volume in hand, for the kitchen. Her recipes always work, too. Something that cannot be said of all cookery writers, sadly. Second-hand copies of her books are comparatively rare. Dog-eared and much loved, they stay on readers' shelves until they fall to pieces and have to be replaced with a new copy. There's more to it than that, though. Unlike so many other writers, Jane did not view traditional food through the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. The debasement of a 'domestic tradition that was once our glory' angered her, but she never romanticised the past, or rejected modern improvements on time-honoured recipes. It tickled her no end, for instance, that the winner of the 'Great Yorkshire Pudding Contest' was a Chinese man from Hong Kong and that his winning recipe was somewhat unorthodox.

She was chauvinistic about English food, but only in the most intelligent and unblinkered sense of the word. With clear-sighted determination she ploughed her way through layers of fossilised myth, to find the original honesty that has characterised the best English cooking. Why deny the French or Italian origins of a dish, or ignore it altogether, when it has become an established part of the English repertoire? The development of a national culinary repertoire reflects the development of the nation itself. Jane's interest in the history of

cookery and of individual recipes was the focus of her wider curiosity about the world around her.

All too often books on English food come to a sudden halt either at the beginning of or mid-way through this century. But the history of good English food did not end cataclysmically with the outbreak of the Second World War. It continues, and with her last revisions to *English Food* Jane acknowledges the influence of established ethnic communities, bringing in recipes such as the Three-Gourd Garnish for chicken or fish to sit alongside the more obviously 'English' dishes.

In her 1979 introduction to the book Jane wrote pessimistically about the future of British food, lashing out against the impoverishment of mass commercialisation. By the time she came to revise *English Food* in the late '80s', she wrote again with cautious optimism. Gradually, throughout the decade, small producers providing high quality foods with traditional values had begun to re-establish themselves. That they were able to do so is thanks largely to Jane, and the like-minded food writers who followed her pioneering lead.

SOPHIE GRIGSON

*April 1999*

# INTRODUCTION

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THE ENGLISH ARE A VERY ADAPTIVE PEOPLE. English cooking – both historically and in the mouth is a great deal more varied and delectable than our masochistic temper in this matter allows. There's an extra special confusion nowadays in talking of good and bad national cooking. The plain fact is that much commercial cooking is bad, or mediocre in any country – it's easy enough to get a thoroughly disappointing meal even in France where there exists an almost sacred devotion to kitchen and table. The food we get publicly in England isn't so often bad English cooking as a pretentious and inferior imitation of French cooking or Italian cooking. It is also true that a good many things in our marketing system now fight against simple and delicate food. Tomatoes have no taste. The finest flavoured potatoes are not available in shops. Vegetables and fruits are seldom fresh. Milk comes out of Friesians. Cheeses are subdivided and imprisoned in plastic wrapping. 'Farm fresh' means eggs which are no more than ten, fourteen or twenty days old. Words such as 'fresh' and 'home-made' have been borrowed by commerce to tell lies.

In spite of all this the English cook has a wonderful inheritance if she cares to make use of it. It's a question of picking and choosing, and that exactly is what I have done for this book. My aim has been to put in obvious dishes on a basis of quality; even more I have tried to show how many surprises there are. I have also included a number of Welsh dishes because I like them, and because they are linked closely with much English food, while retaining a rustic elegance which we have tended to lose.

No cookery belongs exclusively to its country, or its region. Cooks borrow – and always have borrowed – and adapt through the centuries. Though the scale in either case isn't exactly the same, this is true, for example, of French cooking as of English cooking. We have borrowed from France. France borrowed from Italy direct, and by way of Provence. The Romans borrowed from the Greeks, and the Greeks borrowed from the Egyptians and Persians. What each individual country does do is to give all the elements, borrowed or otherwise, something of a national character. The history of cooking is in some ways like the history of language, though perhaps it's harder to unravel, or like the history of folk music. The first mention of a dish, the first known recipe for it, can seldom be taken as a record of its first appearance. As far as origins go, there's seldom much point in supposing that a dish belongs

to Yorkshire or Devonshire, or Shropshire because it's survived in those places and may bear their names. What goes for counties goes for countries. Who's to say whether *Pain Perdu* or Poor Knights of Windsor is really English or French; both in France and England it was a dish of the medieval court. Did the English call it *payn pur-dew* out of the kind of snobbery we can still recognize, or because they took it from France? And if they took it from France, where did the French take it from? It's a marvellous way of using up stale bread, especially good bread, and who's to say that earlier still the Romans, or the Greeks before the Romans, didn't see the point of frying up bread and serving it with something sweet? In England today *Pain Perdu* has been anglicized into a nursery or homely dish, Poor Knights of Windsor. In France with Brioche to hand, or the light *pain de mie*, *Pain Perdu* remains a select dish gracefully adorned with brandied fruit and dollops of cream under such names as *Croûte aux Abricots*.

There's no avoiding the fact that the best cooking has come down from the top. Or if you don't like the word 'top', from the skilled, employed by those who could pay and had the time to appreciate quality. In England on the whole the food descends less from a courtly tradition than from the manor houses and rectories and homes of well-to-do merchants – latterly from a Jane Austen world. It hands down the impression of the social life of families in which the wives and daughters weren't too grand to go into the kitchen and to keep a close eye on the vegetable garden and dairy. This was the world in which the great amateur horticulturalist Thomas Andrew Knight in his Herefordshire manor house diversified and improved so many fruits and vegetables in the late years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth.

One thing to note is that the great English cookery writers from Hannah Glasse to Elizabeth David have most often been women, in contrast to the French tradition of cookery writing by male chefs. Our classical tradition has been domestic, with the domestic virtues of quiet enjoyment and generosity. Whatever happened when the great mass centres developed in the nineteenth century, English cookery books of the eighteenth century to early Victorian times had been written from an understanding of good food and good eating, a concern for quality. Mrs Beeton had her great qualities, and gave many marvellous recipes. But from the first edition of her book in 1859, you can see the anxiety of the new middle class, balanced between wealth and insolvency, and always at pains to keep up appearances. And keeping up appearances remains the *leitmotiv* of much modern food advertising. Showy photographs in

what is called 'full' colour and the message, 'Impress your Friends' or 'Impress his Boss', suggest that without taking any trouble or thought at all, marvellous food will fall out of the packet on to the plate. We need to renew and develop the old tradition of Hannah Glasse, Elizabeth Raffald, Maria Rundell and Eliza Acton as far as we can in our changed circumstances. It is no accident, I hope, that these early writers are being reprinted, often in facsimile, and that their dishes appear on the menus of some of our best restaurants as well as in an increasing number of homes.

SINCE FINISHING THE FIRST EDITION of this book in 1974, I have come to understand the weakness of the domestic tradition that was once our glory, and to a certain extent – in some homes – still is.

The weakness is a lack of professionalism, the lack in each of us, of a solid grounding in skill and knowledge about food, where it comes from, how it should be prepared. Somehow we do not manage in shops and restaurants to keep high standards that constantly remind the cook at home of what food can be. You have only to spend a day visiting Fauchon or Le Nôtre in Paris, or some of the supermarkets of German and Italian towns, and then spend the next day visiting the groceries of Piccadilly to see what I mean. How often when you go to a restaurant for a meal are you delighted to eat something far better than you can make yourself? To enjoy some aspect of skill that makes you long to get into the kitchen next day, and see if you can come anywhere near it?

The thing is that if you have a solid basis of skill, and can constantly refer to the highest standards, you have a better chance of adapting to the changes of life than if you merely look in magazines and books for new 'recipes'. The English, like the Americans, are always demanding 'recipes'. And cookery writers like myself provide them. I am lucky in working mainly for a paper that allows me enough space to hint at the fact that words such as apple, cheese, bread are meaningless: that for good food one needs to understand that a Cox's Orange Pippin in a pie will give you a quite different result from a Bramley; that for a good cheese sauce Parmesan must be used because English hard cheeses will put too much fat into the sauce before they can achieve the same intensity of flavour; that sliced bread and frozen poultry are not worth buying – ever. I suspect, from my reading, that mass circulation women's magazines are directed by entirely populist points of view – that one should never suggest that one variety of a fruit will give you something better, because half their readers

think they cannot afford it. In a country that spends the amount ours does on hard liquor, gambling, ice cream of a worthless kind, sweets, cakes, biscuits, this is nonsense. If people choose to spend it that way, fair enough. But let them not plead poverty as an excuse for bad food. And let people who provide the awful food not shrug off responsibility by saying, 'Well it's what *they* want.'

This really is *trahison des clercs*. 'Let them have trash' seems a far worse attitude than 'Let them eat brioche.' The latter came from a complete lack of understanding; the former comes from a conniving complicity in lower standards by people who would not accept them for themselves and their families at home. To provide worthless things, or things that are worse than they should be, shows what you think of your fellow human beings. In the past food was often adulterated by unscrupulous purveyors – sand in the sugar, dried hawthorn leaves in the tea, water in the milk – but at least this was recognized as a vicious thing to do. Now our food is adulterated and spoilt in ways that are entirely legal, even encouraged. Have you managed to buy farm butter recently? Or a farmyard chicken that has run free? And these crimes against good food are encouraged by domestic science teachers who think it is fine to teach pupils to make pies with pastry-mix and ready-prepared pie fillings. When criticized, they answer, 'We have no time; anyway at least they enable us to teach children the "manipulative skills".' What skills? The skill to turn on the tap and mix the mix to a dough? The skill to operate a tin-opener? The skill to read instructions on the packet or tin? The skill to spoon the filling into a dish? The skill to turn on the oven, a foolproof oven, to the correct temperature? Such 'manipulative skills' are usually mastered at home before school begins, or at the latest in the infant school. The development of taste and true knowledge should be the business of secondary school home economics teachers. And if they are not able to do this through bad organization of the curriculum, they should be seeking to change the system, not conniving in it and excusing themselves. I think it is ironic that the countries of Europe where you get the better food are the countries where such a subject is not taught at the usual state secondary school.

In 1974 I finished *English Food* full of hope. In discovering at least something of our tradition for myself, I began to see that we did have a treasury to be exploited, perhaps exploited into a new cookery of our own. This revision of *English Food*, in 1979, has been completed in a spirit of pessimism. It is France with its strong professional basis of skill that has produced a *nouvelle cuisine*. Oh yes, we buy the books, we have taken it to our hearts – for the moment.

This means we are debasing it as fast as we can. One top-circulation women's magazine  
published an article adapting – sinister word – these new ideas for ‘family meals’. The  
adaptation consisted in suggesting the use of tinned peas and carrots; it completely balked at  
the problem of chicken. Yet the whole point of the *nouvelle cuisine*, and especially that branch  
known as the *cuisine minceur*, is that ingredients must be first of all of the highest quality and  
freshness. If they are not, many of the dishes taste as dull as any reconstituted dehydrated  
convenience pack. The absolutely essential lessons of the style are lost. It has been reduced to  
a lot of new ‘recipes’ that will dominate nomenclature for a year or two until the next craze  
hits these shores. Will Michel Guérard’s best-selling books mean we can buy really young  
fresh peas at the greengrocery next summer? Or better-hung beef at the supermarket  
counter? Or that shoppers will become more resistant? I suspect it will not.  
Or am I wrong? Somehow I can never quite suppress a naive optimism; an optimism that is  
buffeted every time I visit my local shops, but yet refuses quite to lie down even when  
confronted with perceived realities. Sometimes I hear from people who live in some pocket  
of good food that has escaped the attentions of commerce in hastening ‘that sad process  
which Max Weber described as “the disenchantment of the world”.’

JANE GRIGSON

*January 1977*

# SOUPS

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THE BEST ENGLISH SOUPS ARE UNRIVALLED, but one might wish there were more of them. Soup is a primitive dish. Such soups as mulligatawny and oxtail and mutton broth – or the Welsh cawl – are continuing good versions of very old ways of cooking meat, at least as old as the first making of metal pots. All the same, soups are capable of great refinement and delicacy, particularly the fish and vegetable soups. They have the advantage of being easy to make, and variable within quite wide limits. A soup can be a meal, or it can be the introduction to a meal. It can be a comfort in itself, or an appetizer. And in these late days praise for a good home-made soup is out of all proportion to the effort involved – and it doesn't cost much.

Soup, or pottage as it was called, was eaten by everyone in the earlier centuries of our history. If you were poor it consisted of water thickened with oatmeal, rye flour or bread, and flavoured with such vegetables and pulses as fields and gardens might provide. Bones or a scrap of bacon, milk, cream and butter all helped to give extra interest, as did parsley and other herbs. Root vegetables were known as potherbs, even as late as the thirties, when I was a child: you could go to the shop and get a cheap collection of roots for flavouring soups and stews. I notice that this practice has been taken up by supermarkets, though the name has been dropped. Alas the bargain is not such a good one, as the various vegetables have all been washed, prepared and packed in plastic which deprives them of flavour.

The pottage of the rich in pre-Renaissance times, though made in a similar way in great pots was more varied and finer in its grace notes. Rice that came from the Arabs on boats that brought us spices, almonds and raisins, was used as thickener, as were eggs and a powdered wheat starch known as amidon. Spices flavoured the soups and soup-stews – the borderline between the two was a tenuous one – as did wine. Thicker soups might be coloured by streaking in ripples of saffron and saunders (sandalwood) which gave a red tint against saffron's glowing yellow. By using the white part of leeks and other pale vegetables, with rice and almond milk, cooks produced an elegant white soup which was still being made centuries later for parties and special dinners in the time of Jane Austen and Eliza Acton.

Cooks to the medieval grand family played with sweet-sour effects in a way that seems decidedly exotic today. Lenten and fastday soups might consist of puréed apples and white wine, thickened with rice flour, embellished with currants, chopped dates and slivered



almonds: there would be a flavouring of mace, cloves, pepper, cinnamon and ginger, a marbling of saffron and saunders, and finally a decorative scatter of poached, shredded pear. The French may sneer at our taste for sweet and savoury together, but many such recipes came from the French court in the first place, as did some notable soup-stews such as the civet which we still make in both countries: the name comes from the characterizing addition of onion in some form, *cive* in Old French, which is still used for chives, along with *civette* and *ciboulette*. We think of it as a hare dish: in the grand kitchens of fifteenth century cooks it was made with other game, too, or with fish. Tench, an easily caught freshwater fish, was popular for a civet: it was simmered and roasted (in that order), mixed with pepper, saffron, bread and ale, and finally flavoured with onions fried in oil.

It seems to me that cooks in those days were resourceful at many levels of society. A greater variety of herbs and potherbs was grown in gardens than is normal now. In the middle of the sixteenth century, one much travelled writer, Andrew Boorde, complimented them when he remarked that 'Pottage is not so much used in all Christendom as it is used in England'. Food writers have remarked that we seemed to have lost our taste for vegetables in some mysterious way in the sixteenth century. Certainly the variety grown seems to have declined but in quantity vegetables played an important part in people's diets especially if they were poor, especially in the years of wheat famine. I suspect, too, that our ways of cooking them lack finesse. Foreign visitors commented on the many little heaps of vegetables swimming in too much butter.

What happened, I think, was that the style of eating changed, at least for the upper and increasingly powerful middle classes, who were affected by some of the new ideas about eating abroad in mainland Europe of the Renaissance (though not affected enough according to one Italian visitor, Giacomo Castelvetro, writing in 1614: see the vegetable chapter). Instead of being the main item of the meal, soups and soup-stews drew further apart, with the stews becoming less liquid and more elegant. Soups were relegated to the opening stage. If you look at a plan for the first course of a dinner party in an eighteenth century cookery book, say Mrs Raffald's *Experienced English Housekeeper*, you will see that the meal was organized very differently from our dinner parties to-day. For each course the table was covered with a large number of different dishes of varying sizes according to the position they occupied (this is known as the French service). At each end there was a large tureen of soup, one thick and one thin. When the guests had drunk a polite bowlful, the tureens were

removed and their place was filled with splendid roasts, beef or venison, and a large fish: these were carved and cut up by the host and hostess. To all the other dishes, people helped their neighbours and themselves.

Sitting down to such a spread of food, much of it cooling rapidly, people came to regard soup as little more than an appetizer. And when this old buffet style was superseded by the Russian service in the middle of the nineteenth century, with one dish being served at a course and everybody eating the same thing at the same time – the way we eat to-day – this status was confirmed. Simplicity and high quality became the standards of a good dinner. In families, something of the old style remained, with stews and thick soups becoming standard winter fare. Not until the last forty years, with the popularity of Elizabeth David's books, have we dared to serve *civets* and *daubes* and *potées* and *garbures* and *cassoulets* at dinner parties. With the popularity of *nouvelle cuisine* cookery, such dishes went out for a while in the seventies, in favour of delicate soups rather in the Japanese style, followed by decorative plates of beautifully cut meat or fish and a few vegetables. This very tricky and last-minute cookery began to readmit the family soup-stews in a refined form and now a return to *cuisine grandmère*, much easier to control and therefore more economic, is in full swing.

A great relief all round. Nothing is more difficult than trying to give visitors at home a *nouvelle cuisine* dinner with plate-service. Everything gets cold, for a start, and the waits between courses become nerve-wracking. After one attempt, most of us gave it up. All the same it was a comfort to me to read James Beard's introduction to his new cookery book in 1981; the section headed *Feel Free*. He talked of the old tyranny of the Russian service, dinner in the Escoffier style: 'In my youth, a "proper" dinner had to have something light at each end, like consommé to begin and fruit to finish – you could call the menu diamond-shaped, with a big bulge at the main course. ... Usually it was a roast, with something starchy and several vegetables.' In the next paragraph comes liberation with his blessing... 'the main course is whatever you want to star – the nicest thing, perhaps, that you are offering at that meal. For some cooks, it may well be dessert, though not for me... This year for my annual celebration of the first shad roe, we had a luscious pair of sautéed roes apiece – with parsley – then very small paillards of veal with a little cucumber salad... and wound up with just a taste of fresh strawberry sorbet. A wedge-shaped dinner, then. And why not? It tasted wonderful, and taste is the only rule a cook need acknowledge, in this happy time of freshness and freedom.'

An English cook has to be quite brave to treat a soup or soup-stew as the main course of a meal. Scotch cooks can do it with their cockie-leekie (see [page 195](#)) or the Welsh with their cawl (see [page 20](#)). Perhaps we have been put off by the tradition of Dickens and the workhouse, and little boys' bones in the cauldron, and manor house ladies with their charitable soups. Nearly every Victorian cookery book has a recipe for beneficent or charitable soup, to be trotted round the parish by mother and unmarried daughters to the deserving poor. The French chef of the Reform Club, the great Alexis Soyer, caused a sensation by nobly going over to Ireland in the potato famine to save Irish souls with his soup (like most other benevolent soups of the time, it was not very nutritious). But soups are a good thing all the same. We have no need to blush for our Palestine soup, pea soup, smoked haddock soup, proper mulligatawny. And English eel soup and oyster soup are superb, so is the old white soup made from almonds – a masterpiece of delicacy.

Meat or poultry stock is not essential for vegetable soups – indeed it can spoil the flavour when you are using particularly good fresh vegetables. However I can recommend making a simple stock from the peelings and detritus of the vegetables you are using, with such additions of onion, herbs and spices as seem appropriate. Fish stock is no trouble to anyone, as it can be produced in half an hour from a couple of pounds of sole, turbot, whiting, cod or salmon bones, head and skin which most fishmongers will give you for nothing or for a few pence (note that fish bones should not be cooked for any longer than 30 minutes – unless you like your fish soup flavoured with glue).

Which leaves us with meat, poultry and game stock. This is simple for microwave or Aga and other solid fuel stove owners: without trouble they can produce excellent stocks and store them in the freezer. If you put meat on the bone into the pot – bone being essential to many good soups – you do not need to prepare a preliminary stock. Most hearty English, indeed most British soups, are of this type – boiling fowl, boiling beef, boiling mutton or lamb cooked gently for hours in water with a few potherbs. A stock pot is a bad idea outside a professional kitchen, where it can be properly looked after, skimmed, reboiled and used quickly (this is not to say that liquor left over from boiling chicken, beef or fish is not a good idea if you happen to have it, but store it in the freezer and never keep it hanging around). A few years ago it was quite the fashion for cookery books to suggest that you keep a stock pot on the go, adding bits and pieces to it day by day, topping it up with water as you removed the contents for soups. This is a sure route to food poisoning and nasty flavours. When you

make a stock, strain the liquor from the debris, cool it fast and freeze it in convenient sized containers as rapidly as possible. It is quite a good idea to reduce the strained stock to a strong flavour and freeze it in an ice-cube tray: the cubes can be stored in a plastic bag, ready for use. This is much more satisfactory than recourse to stock cubes.

Stock or soup cubes are, incidentally, nothing new to the English. Before the days of canning meat was simmered, and the resulting liquid boiled down to a gluey sediment or glaze, which was cut into small lumps and known as portable soup. Explorers, sailors, anyone on the move would carry a little bagful, then heat up a few lumps with water to make an instant soup, that could be improved with any ingredients to hand (a splash of vinegar, for instance, which is a great brightener of flavour). Today's cubes with their monosodium glutamate give a second-rate flavour and sameness, which is to be avoided.

Some of the pleasure of soups consist in such final additions and embellishments as fried cubes of bread, crumbs of crisp bacon, chopped green herbs, an egg custard *royale* cut into little diamonds. Brandy and port make a wonderful difference to meat and game soups, just as a little dry white wine makes all the difference to several of the fish soups. This has been much more of an English practice than you would suppose, going back at least to the court cookery of Chaucer's time. Cream, chopped parsley, egg yolks, grated Parmesan, a knob of butter are all good enrichments for vegetable soups. The Welsh – and Scots – chop leeks and add them to meat soups before they are served. The leek softens slightly in the heat without cooking properly, and so retains an agreeable crispness and a light overtone of onion which is not in the least aggressive.

### ALMOND SOUP (WHITE SOUP)

A BEAUTIFULLY WHITE SOUP which goes back to the cookery of the Middle Ages, the courtly cookery of England and France (the French name is *soupe à la reine*). Almonds then played an even larger part in fine dishes than they do today. As well as its flavour, this soup has the advantage of being made from the kind of ingredients that most people have in the house in summer or winter: perhaps this is another reason why it has survived so many centuries, not just in palaces but in the homes of people of moderate prosperity. In the country, it was a favourite soup for winter parties – in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Bingley declared his firm intention of giving a ball at Netherfield, 'as soon as Nicholls has made white soup enough, I shall send round my cards.' Eliza Acton remarked when she gave a recipe for Westerfield White Soup, on which the following recipe is based, that she had not varied the original at all, 'as the soup made by it – of which we have often partaken – seemed always much approved by the guests of the hospitable country gentleman from whose family it was

derived, and at whose well-arranged table it was very commonly served.’

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For 6

*1½ litres (2½ pts) veal or light beef stock (see below)*  
*60 g (2 oz) blanched almonds*  
*30 g (1 oz) white bread, weighed without crusts*  
*1 egg yolk*  
*150ml (¼ pt) each double and soured cream or milk*  
*Salt, pepper, lemon juice, Cayenne pepper*  
*60 g (2 oz) toasted or fried almonds to garnish, or tiny cubes of bread fried in butter*

#### STOCK

*Small bacon hock or 125 g (4 oz) lean gammon*  
*Meaty veal knuckle bone, chopped in three*  
*1 onion, quartered*  
*1 carrot, quartered*  
*4 sticks celery, sliced*  
*1 teaspoon lightly crushed peppercorns*  
*2 blades of mace*  
*1 bay leaf*  
*1 tablespoon salt*

**FIRST** make the stock. Put meaty items into a large pan and cover with at least 2 litres (4 pts) cold water. Bring to the boil and skim, replacing liquid with extra cold water. When clear, add the vegetables, pepper, mace, bay leaf and salt. Keep at a bare simmer for 4 hours. Strain, chill overnight and remove any fat from the jellied stock.

To make the soup, boil the stock down to 1½ litres (2½ pts). Put the almonds and bread into a blender, add some of the stock and liquidize to a smooth paste. Strain into the remaining stock, pushing through as much as you can (a blender does a more efficient job than a processor). Beat the egg yolk with the creams or cream and milk and add to the soup. If possible leave for an hour or two – this will improve and mellow the flavour. Reheat, keeping the soup well below boiling point so as not to curdle the egg. Add salt, pepper, lemon juice and Cayenne pepper to taste and bring out the flavour. Serve garnished with almonds or croûtons (boiled vermicelli or macaroni was once added at the end, but this seems stodgy to our modern tastes).

### APPLE SOUP

IT IS INTERESTING THAT THIS SOUP of most unusual ingredients – unusual in combination, that is – tastes very clear and refreshing in a way that seems entirely modern. Yet the recipe comes from Eliza Acton’s *Modern Cookery* of 1845. Miss Acton attributed it to Burgundy – perhaps she came across it when she spent a year in France after the Napoleonic wars – but it does not appear in any French collections of Burgundian recipes. In the end I came across the original version, in a reprinted manuscript from the Bodleian Library at Oxford, of the beginning of the fifteenth century. It’s called *Apple moys*, or apple mush (from the French *mou* meaning soft): the apples are cooked and sieved and added to ‘good fat broth of beef’. The

seasonings were sugar, saffron, and ginger. On fast days, almond 'milk' and olive oil were used instead of beef stock. The rice or pearl barley are also within the fifteenth-century tradition.

For 6

*1½ litres (2½ pts) beef stock*

*350 g (12 oz) good cooking apples, or Cox's*

*½ teaspoon ginger*

*¼ teaspoon pepper plus either some boiled rice, or 90 g (3 oz)*

*pearl barley, soaked, and simmered in a little extra beef stock until cooked*

**BRING** the beef stock to the boil, and add the apples roughly chopped, core and all. When they are soft, push the soup through a vegetable mill or sieve. Season it with ginger and pepper, adding a little extra if you like. Mix in the rice or pearl barley and serve very hot.

### INDIAN SOUP

**A CLEAR BUT SPICY SOUP** with a lively freshness and a mysterious flavour.

For 6

*1¾ litres (3 pts) beef stock*

*2 large onions, sliced*

*1 large cooking apple, sliced, peel and all*

*1 tablespoon desiccated coconut*

*2 teaspoons curry powder*

*Bones from chicken or game carcass*

*2 large egg whites*

*Salt, pepper, Cayenne pepper (optional), lemon juice*

*Scraps of chicken or game picked from carcass*

*3-4 tablespoons boiled basmati rice*

**SIMMER** the first six ingredients in a covered pan for 1 hour. Strain and blot away any fat with kitchen paper. Beat in the egg whites and continue beating over a moderate heat until the liquid is topped by a dirty-looking, greyish colour. Simmer for 5 minutes without beating, then pour off the clear liquid underneath through a cloth-lined strainer. Taste and adjust seasoning, adding Cayenne if you like a hotter effect. Lemon juice enhances the freshness. Cut the little bits of chicken or game into neat shreds. Add to the soup with the rice and reheat without boiling.

### CHESTNUT AND APPLE SOUP

**MANY EUROPEAN CHESTNUT SOUPS** are flavoured with bacon, and made on the heavy side. Understandable, when soup had to be the whole meal. This apple and chestnut recipe is more suitable for soup as a first course only.

500 g (1 lb) chestnuts in their shells  
 2 litres (3½ pts) light beef stock or water  
 1 stick celery  
 2 large Cox's apples, peeled, cored, sliced  
 60 g (2 oz) butter  
 125 ml (4 oz) single cream  
 Salt, pepper  
 Bread croûtons fried in butter

**NICK** the chestnuts from the centre to the pointed top, at right angles to the base. Boil them in water for 10 minutes, then turn the heat off and remove the chestnuts one by one to peel them. To do this, put your left hand into an oven glove to hold the chestnut, then use a small sharp knife to peel off the shell, and then to remove the inner brown skin. If the chestnuts were a good, fat glossy brown to start with, they should be quite easy to deal with. Making a nick from the centre to the pointed end means that the shell peels off much more easily, and the nut in consequence remains more or less intact (though for this recipe, it doesn't matter if the nuts have crumbled into pieces).

Now cook the chestnuts with the stock and celery for about 20 minutes; meanwhile simmer the apple slices in the butter with a good sprinkling of pepper. Liquidize chestnuts, celery and apple with the stock and the buttery apple juices. Taste and correct seasoning. Add the cream. If the soup is too thick for your taste (the thickness will obviously depend on how many chestnuts had to be discarded), dilute it with water. It should not be too heavy in texture, but light, with a faint sharpness from the apples. Serve with croûtons.

## BROAD BEAN SOUP

For 4

125 g (4 oz) chopped onion  
 60 g (2 oz) butter  
 250 g (9 oz) shelled broad beans  
 ½ teaspoon chopped sage, savory or parsley  
 Salt, pepper, sugar  
 4 tablespoons cream  
 Croûtons of fried bread

**SOFTEN** the onion in the butter, without browning it. Add the beans together with 1 litre (1¾ pints) of water and bring to the boil. Put in whichever herb you choose, together with salt, pepper and ¼ teaspoon of sugar. When the beans are cooked, remove a tablespoon of them, rinse them under the cold tap and peel off the white skins; set them aside. Sieve or liquidize the soup. Add the skinned beans and reheat. Correct the seasoning and add a little more sugar if necessary. Stir in the cream and serve with croûtons.

## WATERCRESS SOUP

**HERE IS MARGARET COSTA'S VERSION** of watercress soup, from *Four Seasons Cookery Book*. A good

For 6

*500 g (1 lb) potatoes, peeled, diced*  
*1 onion, sliced*  
*1½ litres (2½ pts) chicken stock or water*  
*1 small onion*  
*1 large or 2 small bunches watercress*  
*Butter*  
*Salt, grated nutmeg, pepper*  
*2-3 tablespoons cream*

**COOK** the potatoes with the sliced onion in a little water until tender. Put through a sieve or *mouli-légumes*, then mix to a thin, smooth purée with the stock or water. Grate in the onion. Set aside a few of the best leaves of the watercress to garnish the soup. Chop the remaining leaves and the tender part of the stems; stew in butter for 5 minutes, then add to the soup. Season with salt, nutmeg and pepper as you reheat it. Finish with the leaves you set aside and the cream (use butter if you have no cream).

### GREEN PEA SOUP

For 6

*250 g (8 oz) shelled peas*  
*1 medium onion, chopped*  
*60 g (2 oz) butter*  
*2 rashers smoked streaky bacon, chopped*  
*1 litre (1¾ pts) chicken or light ham stock*  
*Salt, pepper*  
*Chopped parsley*

**THIS** soup can be made in wintertime quite successfully with frozen peas or with dried split green peas which have been soaked (125 g (4 oz) dried peas). In the latter case, the cooking time will have to be prolonged to an hour.

First cook the onion gently in the butter until it begins to soften and turn gold. Add the bacon and fry for another 2 or 3 minutes. Pour in 600ml (1 pt) of the stock, add the peas and simmer until they are cooked. Liquidize and dilute to taste with more stock, add seasoning to taste – if you are using dried peas it is particularly important not to add salt before they are cooked. Reheat, sprinkle with parsley and serve.

**THE PECULIARLY** English thing about this soup is the flavour of smoked bacon. It belongs to the tradition of boiled salt pork and pease pudding. In the early summer, you could flavour the soup with other vegetables rather than the bacon, and substitute water for the stock. Slice or shred half a large cucumber with its peel, the heart of a Cos lettuce and a small handful of spinach. Stew them in a little butter with three or four sprigs of mint until they are cooked. Liquidize with the cooked peas.



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