

Here are two sample blog posts from unfussyfare.com, a short-lived foodie project of mine. The effort-to-reward ratio didn't pencil out, so I took the blog down. I can still go on and on about food. - Gillian J. Freney

Wild Mushroom Soup

Mushrooms are the enticing bad-boy of the vegetable world. It's hard to decide if they're beautiful or ugly, which makes me want to buy them a drink and hear their story. Their poisonous cousins add to the intrigue. Mushrooms walk the line between funk and sophistication. Make them into a luscious soup, and they taste just as complicated and deep as they look.

I had some mushroom kismet. First, a friend who hunts mushrooms on misty Oregon mountainsides gave me a bag of gorgeous chanterelles. At the next day's farmers' market, I was seduced by the sumptuous smell of maitake mushrooms sautéing in butter on a camp stove. Free samples. They work. If the universe hasn't thrown any fabulous mushrooms into your path lately, don't worry. Any old mushrooms will do for this soup.

Before we get to the recipe, I have a confession. At the risk of ruining my reputation as a lazy, short-cutting, step-skipping cook, I recently made my own vegetable stock. Making your own stock is flat fussy. Unless you consider that all you have to do is chop, sauté, add water, and heat. It doesn't require attention, or skill. But it does require forethought, and time. I say that's a lot to ask, but it turns out to be well worth the effort. It seriously bumped up my soup game. I'm sold.

What compelled me to get off my unfussy can and make stock? A post from a vegan blog. I know. What are the odds of me reading a vegan blog? I'm running for President of the Society for the Advancement of Butter. When I think vegan, I think sawdusty cookies and sanctimony. (Sorry, vegan readers. I base my totally unfair generalization on very limited personal experience. I'm sure *you* have a wicked sense of humor and a fabulous flair for cooking.) Regardless, this post made a mighty convincing case for homemade

vegetable stock. So convincing that I made some. I froze it for a rainy day, and it rained mushrooms. How could I resist?

This soup has a sublime interplay of flavors and scents. There's the smell of freshly turned soil, and fall leaves, and hay. That's all in there. And then there's the way the cream flows like smooth silk beside the nubby linen of mushrooms. The leeks and garlic? Delicate stitching. And the wine? Help! I'm trapped in a tortured sewing analogy! I'll just move on. The wine tastes exactly like it was born to simmer with mushrooms and leeks. Which it was. Nuf said.

WILD MUSHROOM SOUP

makes four servings

4 tablespoons butter

2 medium leeks, white and light green parts only, sliced into quarter-inch rounds and rinsed well

2 pounds mushrooms, any kind you like, cleaned and chopped coarsely

1 clove garlic, chopped

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

½ cup white wine

2 ½ cups vegetable stock

1 cup water

½ cup cream

2 tablespoons sherry

salt and pepper to taste

- Melt butter in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add leeks. Sauté for about five minutes.
- Add mushrooms, sprinkle with fresh ground pepper, and sauté until the liquid cooks off and the mushrooms start to brown, about 12 minutes. Hold off salting the vegetables. The stock may be salty enough.
- Add thyme and garlic, and sauté for another minute or two. Add wine and simmer for five minutes.

- Add vegetable stock and water. (Use store-bought stock if you're not inspired to make your own. I'll never tell.) Reduce heat to low, and simmer for 20 minutes.
- Puree soup in a blender or food processor until it is very smooth. Return soup to pot over low heat.
- Add cream and sherry and stir to blend. Warm the soup through over low heat.
- Season to taste with salt and pepper. Garnish with a sprinkling of fresh thyme.

TOM KHA GAI

This one goes out to everyone who ever brought food when the chips were down. I may have forgotten to write a note, given everything. I'm sure you were busy. It took forethought. You had to find that recipe, get groceries, and cook. Then you had to transport it all, which can be messy. You probably wondered if you'd ever get your Tupperware back. It was good of you.

Years ago, when my mother was dying, people brought food. There were casseroles and brownies, homegrown tomatoes and pots of soup. I was mystified. Did they really think we could eat, at a time like that? Well, yes. They knew we could. Everyone eventually does, inconceivable as it seems. I felt like a traitor, eating while my irrepressible mother was slipping away. But she would've rolled her eyes at that sentiment, and reminded me that life is hard enough without all my determined effort to make it harder.

Years later, my husband and I welcomed a son. Dinner came to our doorstep every night for weeks, courtesy of friends and neighbors. I wept with thankfulness. I wept all the time in those days, but that's another story. I can still taste those meals, seasoned as they were with naked gratitude. I missed my Mom. I needed help. And help arrived, wrapped in foil and kindness.

Birth and death are demanding. They just swoop right and in and put their feet up, blithely flicking away the orderly unfolding of our days. We are tender and tired as we attend our loved ones at the beginning and the end. We sing and stroke. We wash and feed. The clock provides less-than-useful information. These are the rhythms of lives, not days. In the midst of these marathons of nurture, gifts of food stand in simple relief. Meals arrive like little missives from the world where the clock still applies, like souvenirs of simpler times. Simpler times seem far away when you're in deep. Food gives strength, and comfort.

A family friend dropped this soup by when my mom was sick. I was dazed by the unfolding loss. My memories of that time are foggy, but I recall thinking this soup was the most delicious thing I ever tasted. I wouldn't have thought it possible to even *notice* a bowl of soup just then, never mind enjoy it. But I savored every bite. It served to remind me that a world outside of sorrow still existed. Life would be there, with all its flavors and delights, when the time came to gather up the fragments of my broken heart and look forward again.

To this day, the complicated interplay of flavors in Tom Kha Gai puts me in mind of nurture, solace, and motherhood. When I know someone with a new baby, or an illness, or a death in the family, this is the dish I most often bring. I pass it on with thanks, for all the grace and sustenance.

I get a lot of requests for this recipe, which is always a good sign. This soup somehow manages to be feisty and harmonious at the same time. It's interesting enough for foodie types, but simple and comforting enough to appeal to less adventurous eaters. (You might need to explain to the aforementioned "less adventurous eaters" that the big stalks of lemongrass and discs of ginger floating around in the soup aren't meant to be eaten. They're just adding flavor.) Sometimes I throw in cooked basmati rice at the end. That may be a Thai-food no-no, but chicken and rice are a soothing combination.

THAI CHICKEN AND COCONUT SOUP (TOM KHA GAI)

makes four generous servings

1 stalk lemongrass
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 medium onion, diced small
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tablespoon Thai red curry paste, or more if you like
6 quarter-inch wide slices fresh ginger
3 kaffir lime leaves (You can substitute ½ teaspoon grated lime peel if you can't find lime leaf.)
4 cups chicken stock
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast, sliced with the grain into quarter-inch wide strips.
2 cups shitake mushrooms, stemmed, caps quartered
1 14-ounce can coconut milk (Don't use low-fat. Trust me. I tried.)
Juice of two limes (about five tablespoons)
2 tablespoons nam pla (AKA fish sauce)
3 green onions, trimmed and sliced into ¼ inch pieces
¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro

- Trim lemongrass, cut into three pieces about four inches long. Whack the pieces with the flat side of your knife blade to crush slightly.
- Heat oil in a saucepan over medium-high heat and saute the onion and garlic for about two minutes.
- Add lemongrass, curry paste, ginger discs, and lime leaf (or peel). Cook, stirring, for three minutes.
- Add stock. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 15 minutes.
- Add coconut milk, chopped chicken and quartered mushroom caps. Cook five minutes, or until the chicken is just cooked through.
- Add lime juice and nam pla. Taste for balance between nam pla and lime. If one flavor is dominating, add a little of the other.
- Garnish with green onion and cilantro.