Chowder for the Wolf at the Door

Description

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When 10 pounds of potatoes and a couple dozen ears of corn show up unannounced, welcome them home to the chowder pot.

After transforming our backyard into a lobster fest for 65 or so guests in September (three years running for this festive event), a few items found themselves left behind by those who pitched in to make the meal happen. The lobster pit not only provided heat for Maineâ??s finest crustaceans, but for the accompaniments of potatoes, corn, mussels, eggs and sausage. We shared nearly everything but overestimated on the cornâ??fresh from Hudson Valley growersâ??and the spuds. Something had to be done with the surprise bounty.

When the time came to put the surplus supplies to use, I followed the wise counsel of the renowned food writer M.F.K. Fisher. In *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942, 1954), her book centered on preparing food during the tough times of rations but largely about living any time, Fisher calls chowder a â??light and hearty soupâ?• that would â??please any hungry family.â?• Her basic recipe for chowder calls for potatoes and corn and she gives readers license to go â??country-simpleâ?• or â??town-elegantâ?• based on their tastes and budgets. More candidly, when debating the controversy of whether or not a chowder should be tomato- or cream-based, Fisher says, â??who cares?â?• and suggests that readers simply cook what pleases them.

Corn chowder

Cooking the wolf can satisfy even the loudest grumps and gripers. Invite friends and family to the stovetop. Cook something. *How to Cook a Wolf* was required reading in a food writing course that I took with cookbook author Monica Bhide about 10 years ago. What I found in that lesson illustrated Fisherâ??s candor and dry humor when talking about sustenance for the stomach and the soul along with her ability to write well with wit and without repetition. She called things as she saw them and so much of what she saw leading up to and into the World War II era seems to be ever-present in these current times. Chapter titles like *How to Keep Alive*, *How to Pray for Peace*, *How to Comfort Sorrow* and *How to Lure the Wolf* provide a framework to discuss nourishment for humanity with universal neutrality.

As for my latest pot of chowder, it filled a hungry family and disappeared completely the following day. The variation described here can be easily adapted for the vegan or the vegetarian diet or enhanced with clams or ham for the meat eater. To those home cooks who render the lard after frying up a pan of bacon, that mug of bacon grease stashed in the back corner of the refrigerator can add the right

measure of fat to the base of your chowder. For big bacon lovers, crumble fried bacon on top of the chowder just before serving. That results in truly rich chowder.

With respect and appreciation for elaborate as well as basic meals like chowder, I am signing off from my regular column at *The Highlands Current*. In addition to writing this food column, Iâ??ve enjoyed working in multiple capacities with the organization since its early digital-only days. Iâ??ll still be writing and cooking, of course, and next up for me is the semi-annual Middle Eastern tasting that my husband and I prepare for about 30 people. The table entices with spicy meats, salads, stewed vegetables and freshly baked bread. Made with everyday ingredients, the mosaic of recipes from the Middle Eastern region turns out an embracing aroma that helps one disregard the wolf for a while.

Corn Chowder

Yield: 8 servings

2 tablespoons bacon fat

1 large onion, chopped

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2 ribs celery, diced

Â½ cup green pepper, chopped

6 medium potatoes, peeled and cubed

6 cups water

1 teaspoon salt

Â½ teaspoon smoked paprika

5 ears corn, quick-cooked and cut from the cob

1 cup whole milk

1 heaping tablespoon flour

freshly ground black pepper and course salt

1. Cook onion, celery and green pepper in bacon grease until browned. Stir in paprika. Add water, potatoes and salt and bring to a low boil. Simmer until tender.
2. Mix in milk and flour, stirring until smooth. Add corn, fresh ground pepper and course salt to taste. Heat thoroughly and serve with crisp crackers.

Text and photos by Mary Ann Ebner

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