

Soup's On

Soup survived the fall of Rome, was popular in the Byzantine Empire, and continues to provide comfort today.

Call it what you want—gruel, potage, bouillon, broth, bisque, stew—soup by any name has been providing mankind with comfort for centuries. Why do we love it so much? It all depends on your perspective.

From the cook's perspective, boiling water offers many advantages. Before the advent of ovens, cooks could count on the fact that water boiled at a constant temperature, giving them greater control in food preparation. It also offered a lower cooking temperature than broiling or roasting over an open fire and water engulfed submerged food, heating it fully. Boiling food in water provided some nice surprises, too—grains and cereals revealed unknown flavors and textures when they were boiled, opening new avenues in food preparation.

From the diner's perspective, soup offers warmth and nutrition that can be easily digested. According to Wikipedia, street vendors in 16th century France sold highly concentrated soups, called 'restaurers,' as restoratives or cures for exhaustion. Portable soup—made by boiling meat in water to form a gelatinous substance—was carried by the British navy in an attempt to prevent scurvy. No matter how you serve it up, soup is good food.

Make yourself a pot of French Onion

1/2 stick butter
1 tablespoon olive oil
8 cups thinly sliced onions (about 2-1/2 pounds)
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon sugar
1 tablespoon flour
8 cups homemade beef stock, or good quality canned stock
1/4 cup Cognac
1 cup dry white wine
8 (1/2-inch) thick slices of French bread, toasted
3/4 pound coarsely grated Gruyere

Heat a heavy saucepan over moderate heat with the butter and oil. When the butter has melted, stir in the onions. Cover and cook slowly until onions are tender and translucent, about 10 minutes. Blend in the salt and sugar, increase the heat to medium high, and let the onions brown, stirring frequently until they are golden, 25 to 30 minutes.

Mix in the flour and cook slowly, stirring, for another 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat, let cool a moment stir in two cups of hot stock. Bring mixture to a simmer and add the remaining stock, Cognac, and wine. Cover loosely and simmer for 1 1/2 hours, adding a little water if the liquid reduces too much season with salt and pepper if desired.

Preheat your broiler. Pour soup into bowls. Place pieces of French bread on top of the soup. Cover the bread with cheese. Broil until cheese is melted and bubbly.