

Broth

ONCE A YEAR, SOMETIMES TWICE, I make *brodo*—or broth—from my favorite cookbook. The author of *The Splendid Table*, Lynne Rossetto Kasper, begins her recipe for *Poultry/Meat Stock* with a testimonial: “It is one of the most flavorful and satisfying stocks I know and I doubt I could recover from a cold without it.” According to Kasper, deep bowls of *brodo*, sprinkled with Parmigiano-Reggiano, provide an elegant opening to a memorable feast. “Of course,” she adds, “ladles of it bring depth and character to soups, stews, sautés, and sauces.” Of course! Many *Splendid Table* dishes, I’ve learned, from *Pan Roasted Quail*, to *Giblet Ragù*, and delectable *Red Wine and Rosemary Risotto*—as well as the pasta I decided to create for a dinner party Richard and I gave this past December, *tortelli di mostarda e castagne*, or *Chestnut Tortelli*—call for tablespoons and cups of the essential broth.

The author photo reveals Kasper to be a pretty, round woman with wide, fervent eyes, clasping her hands in a prayerful position over a few globe artichokes and an uncut wheel of Parmesan cheese. But I am no longer misled by this Minnesota chef’s gentle smile. In all the recipes commanding *brodo*, she gives the most curt of nods to busy lives, and suggests that a lesser potion on page 68, *Brodo Rapido*, or *Quick Stock*, may be substituted for the real McCoy. In one deceptively encouraging sidebar titled “Store-Bought Wonders,” Kasper acknowledges that homemade stock, “the heart of Emilia-Romagna cuisine,” is “the food writer’s nightmare,” because most readers don’t have time to prepare broth. Commercial stocks, with the exception of one California-made salt-free frozen brand (telephone 714.640.0220 to determine its availability in your area), are “always a compromise,” but, she declares, bouillon cubes have “no place in good cooking.” Rossetto Kasper advises the hassled amateur to make the master meat/poultry stock every few months and freeze it instead of stooping to unethical shortcuts.

For our December dinner party this was what I intended to do: Sauce the sweet *tortelli* with two cups of *brodo* and congeal the leftover quarts. Still, the decision to embark on *Splendid Table* stock was a weighty one. *Brodo* calls for grocery bags of ingredients—celery, carrots, onions, bay leaf,

“meaty beef shanks,” and last, but not least, eight or nine pounds of authentic capon. Two supermarkets in Wyoming’s Oil City do carry capon, but the succulent castrati go for about \$21 a bird and are frozen as hard as the Dinwoody Glacier before global warming; defrosting one would add significant expense, plus another day of planning-to-make-*brodo*, to *brodo* making. So I opt for turkey wings—a humbler stand-in.

Rossetto Kasper assures the cook that a celebrated Imola chef, Valentino Marcatilli, makes a robust stock with turkey wings, although, she demurs, the capon version is richer and more appropriate for her own adaptation of Professor Guglielmo Capacchi’s recipe for *Anolini of Parma* (coin-shaped pasta stuffed with *stracotto* that includes the concentrated juices from a pot roast simmered for seventy-two hours.) Although I am positive my mentor would not pollute her personal broth with ordinary gobbler, a trip to Albertson’s, Safeway, the Wal-Mart Superstore, and sometimes Smith’s, seeking packages of fresh turkey wings, is my first step toward *brodo*.

Obtaining the pile of ingredients is just a start. Kasper directs me to cleaver the turkey wings into three-inch chunks—an operation that calls for a chain saw. Instead, I cover the unchopped wings and meaty bones with water (filtered to remove the refinery chemicals, *E-coli*, traces of tear gas, and dry-cleaning solvents that have been known to flow from Oil City taps), boil the liquid in the twenty-gallon aluminum pot Richard and I went halves on, skim off the gray-brown foam, add the vegetables, then cook at a simmer that allows space for the words “one hundred” between bubbles. (Tricky at high altitude, where water boils at 198 degrees Fahrenheit.) After the stock percolates for fourteen hours, I strain out the glutinous veggies and rendered bones, refrigerate the *brodo* in order to scrape off the hard yellow fat, except for two tablespoons of flavor-giving pin dots called “the eyes of the broth.” All in all, *brodo* is an expensive, messy, time-consuming commitment, one requiring resolute conviction.

So why do I make *brodo* then? The most obvious theory is that I brodo-ize because when the broth’s earthy, ambiguous perfume, like cow manure in a rain-soaked barn, begins

to seep through Richard's Victorian cottage and out to its sagging, unpainted porch, I can fantasize I am living in Italy, cheek by jowl with the fresh porcini mushrooms, *salama da sugo*, and hundred-year-old balsamic vinegar Ms. Kasper so reverently describes, instead of in a remote ex-refinery town where even a dry, whitened slab of imported Parmigiano-Reggiano cannot be found.

My guts, however, tell me that this theory is false. I did not adore my three weeks in Italy, when, as a college Dante student, wearing a brown homemade dress, I naively visited that ancient and sophisticated country. The freckled man I

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met in Siena's stone clock tower kidnapped me to the distant *campo*, then threatened to turn me out of the car to packs of wild dogs if I refused to have sex with him. The moment I indignantly exited his Simca to walk back to town in a sliver of moonlight, heard the echoes of the dogs' starving growls, and he finally motioned me, with a resigned curled lip, to get back in, he wouldn't hurt me, is what I most remember about this trip, not the rosy luminance bathing the Tuscan Hills, the endless Jesuses dying across the knees of Mary, or the honking PonteVecchio, where Beatrice no longer walked. In fact, I can't recall a single meal I ate in the culinary heartland I now go to such obses-

sive lengths to replicate. If nostalgia does play a role in my *brodo*-making, it is probably for Little Italy in downtown Manhattan, where I lived until I moved to Wyoming in the middle of my life. I now shake my head at my failure to revere the fresh mozzarella at Joe's Latticheria, or the crusty *pane integrale* at the Spring Street bakery, as I devoted my ardor to concerns that seemed more pressing then—like my troubled relationships with crazy men.

I also believe that, like the author of *The Splendid Table*, I am inclined to rebel against passive prescriptions for American middle-class existence. Americans, it seems to me, are never more quiescent than in relation to food: From micro-waving a TV dinner, to taking out deli pesto pasta, to cashing out at the 168 trendy restaurants—AZ, Pipa, Jo Jo, or Ruby Foo—listed in a single issue of *New York Magazine*, to sighing with the studio audience as Emeril “kicks it up a notch” with handfuls of red pepper, to buying a Beard Award cookbook to display unused on the coffee table, eating has become a spectator sport, and food a commodity to obtain, to praise, to contemplate, but not to create. Even immigrants who cooked fiber-rich rice and beans in their native countries become obese candidates for heart attacks when they hit America's Golden Arches where the frying process replaces eighty percent of the potatoes' water with an especially lethal form of fat. So perhaps I engage in a fourteen-hour culinary task as a personal *satyagraha*, a meditative, subtly political, Gandhian Salt March.

Thwarted nurturing instincts may play a part. There's a slim chance that poultry/meat stock represents a caretaking gesture that I, a bourgeois childless woman, bestow on the deprived who know not that they eat poorly. Or because once, when I simmered this broth in a Shoshone National Forest cabin, a bear smelled the turkey wings wafting their essences into the snow-tinged pines and appeared on my door mat, begging for *brodo*; I was inspired to write a short story about that, so who can say what muse another rendering of broth might invoke? But I was making *brodo* this past December because I was constructing an extravagant Renaissance pasta, stuffed with chestnuts, pears, and apples, for which I was also called upon to contrive a fresh grape syrup that has sweetened and flavored dishes since Biblical

times. This syrup, or *mostarda*, required me to run four pounds of flavorful red grapes through a food mill, and “cure” them in the refrigerator for forty-eight hours before boiling them with dry red wine. After mail ordering Little Italy’s best Parmigiano, discarding one batch of supermarket chestnuts because they were moldy, roasting the next, mixing the pasta with organic eggs and flour, reducing the flavorful grape syrup, could I sabotage the *Splendid Table* soul-force by dumping a vile can of chicken soup on top of all that?

In these rationalizations, I admit, I hear an unpleasant tone: a superior, elitist refrain. Yes, having learned that a quality cook, maybe a quality human, makes *bona fide brodo*, I do so out of what a Mennonite, living plainly, might call *pridefulness*—defined by the dictionary as *arrogance*. In other words, I drive to four supermarkets seeking fresh turkey wings, eyeballing the pricey, gelid capons, because I am capable of doing so, and most mortals are not.

I WILL NOW CONFESS that I wish I didn’t have to attend my own dinner parties. Having cooked for an entire day, at least, I’m fatigued by the time the guests arrive—ringing the doorbell, smiling, sparkling. By then I don’t feel like exchanging my flour-smearred sweatpants for a silk blouse and silver earrings. Because I cook from the sin of pridefulness, I am not sure whether I enjoy cooking or not, but I do know that I don’t enjoy sitting down to the meal I’ve cooked. I prefer snacking—on beer nuts and Talisker—to formal feasts. Stuffed with rich food, my irritable bowel acts up. As I’m preoccupied with the timing of courses, the last-minute stirrings, remembering the orange slice garnish, conversation seems an unwarranted distraction. The *faux pas* of guests are aggravating. For the December dinner party, aware that I’d been fabricating an unpronounceable foreign menu all day, Rob and Sue presented us with a gallon of cheap Merlot. I drank too much of the sour rotgut, plus a stiff martini, and succumbed to queasy, self-reproachful exhaustion. Why do I have to show off like this? I questioned myself silently, while animated chatter and suitably dismayed compliments surged around me. I would have preferred to put the chestnut tortelli, the bowl of grape syrup, the ranch-raised lamb braised in red wine and black olives, and the quivering clove custard on the tablecloth, muttered a civil good evening and crawled into bed. When Rob and Sue finally departed, caroling “Merry Christmas,” I did just that, leaving Richard to attack the volcanic eruption of dirty dishes. Before succumbing to an unconscious stupor, I called out, “Whatever you do, don’t throw out the BROTH—it’s in the big pot.” I was too drained to siphon the unused *brodo* into plastic containers and freeze it that night.

In the morning I found the shiny pot scoured; and the broth—the restorative nurturing bear-invoking prideful elixir—was in the sewer, curing the colds of shivering rats.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH RICHARD has often found its focus on food. When I first met him, ten years ago, I was living in a romantic shack on the Big Laramie River. When he visited on weekends he laid new linoleum, split wood for kindling, and reconnected the PVC pipes when they froze and burst. Then, as now, he carried a Swiss Army knife on his belt, always prepared to cut, saw, or tighten. In exchange, I cooked: Moroccan, Indian, Mexican, Northern Italian, challenging myself to scale increasingly lofty culinary peaks.

Richard, from the Midwest, is the scion of a mother who speaks with awe of those who would dare to make a cake “from scratch,” who herself boasts a slim gourmet repertory of a dry fig cookie. (My mother, by contrast, decorated her mocha gateaux with icing cornucopias spilling homemade marzipan fruit.) When I first met Richard, his concept of *haute cuisine* was a quiche. I think he associated the fragrance of my exotic meals with the sensuous appeal of the misplaced chef—a half-Jewish woman, tottering through the frozen sagebrush in slippery high heels, blistering her citified hands on the oversized wood stove. When I set the chicken tajine with cinnamon, olives, and preserved lemon before him, my lover would dilate his nostrils, close his eyes, and sigh deeply, as if the spicy aromas had transported him straight to the banqueting hall of the Shulamite. I confess my incipient *pridefulness* grew with the knowledge that I had managed to produce ethnic cuisine in a wilderness. From my kitchen window, I watched dogs chew a dead mule deer, trapped in the ice.

Richard, an artist and carpenter, is now a first rate sous chef, who effortlessly minces onion into a quarter-inch dice. Still, I suspect his passion for exotic fare is part of a fleeting reincarnation he expects to escape in future lives. I knew he had observed me making the broth; we had both commented on its tantalizing aroma; I was reasonably sure he had registered my groggy order to save it. When I asked, at first rather quietly, then again and again in an increasingly shrill, disbelieving stammer, “You THREW OUT the BROTH?” he replied, oh so casually, then loudly, defensively, “That brown glop? Yeah, it was all slimy and greasy—so I pitched it. It was a mistake, all right?”

Reader, I lost it. I always imagined “I tore my hair” was an idiomatic expression, not based on a real act. To tear hair,

Right: Betty Tompkins, *Foreplay*, 1991. Acrylic on 8" cast-iron pan.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



I now comprehend, is the only recourse left to one who feels so disregarded she must attack a part of her physical being to prove to herself that she still exists. I ran back and forth. I ululated; I hurled generic feminist, then more personal, insults about male intelligence. As it happened, I was wearing the gray and white pin-striped flannel pajamas I'd recently bought on sale at The Bon. I knew, even as I'd signed the Visa receipt, that I would come to regret purchasing this sleepwear parody of a stockbroker's suit, that the soft, shapeless PJs would prove so comfortable I would be disinclined to leave the house if my departure obliged me to take them off. Alas, I did not foresee that a time would come when all that I stood for would be subject to mockery because I was garbed in them. So as I stumbled up and down the hardwood floor, screaming about broth, mutilating my hair, I was mortified by the baggy pinstripes billowing behind me, filling with air. The old white cat puffed out his tail and flew down the stairs to hide in the basement.

Richard eyed this performance sternly. Finally, he said, "Get out! Pack up your things...and just get out of here." In fact, we've dismissed marriage, and with it, the non-liberated sharing of goods: we split grocery bills; the Milton Avenue cottage is his.

AFTER HE LEFT FOR WORK, I hunched miserably in the living room, still wearing the unfortunate pajamas. Before I could register the emotional implications of this eviction, I had to consider what it would mean to "pack up the things" I've acquired at countless yard sales in the thirteen years I've lived in Wyoming. All that, plus the contents of my abandoned New York apartment, would have to be transported and resettled somewhere. It was December—too cold for a yard sale. I looked around and saw that the kitchen table was mine, the big beige couch, the lamps, and all of the antique mirrors were mine, the cacti were mine...A significant percentage of the plethora consisted of cooking equipment: the Calphalon pots, bundt, tart, and popover pans, food processor, waffle iron, salad spinner, melon baller, larding needle, and olive pitter, Talavera platters, shelves of contemporary and antique cookbooks. It was sad to realize that this fortress of *batterie de cuisine* had not created a defensible home. Only the witch's cauldron I'd made the *brodo* in belonged to both of us.

That night I learned that Richard had consulted a counselor about the broth incident. The counselor, in over his head, had referred him to a family therapist. We're do-it-yourself types, so we sat down for one of those talks wherein all the issues we'd been too busy to fight about spread their black wings and squeaked out of the attic. We followed our

ground rules: Don't Interrupt. No Sarcastic Chuckling When the Other is Speaking. After we talked for hours, the old white cat, ignored for days, stretched out on his back between us, revealing his fat pink belly, a pose Richard calls "Shooting the Beaver." We both laughed, apologized, and that fight was over. Still, I mused, a pot of fancy thrown-away soup, trivial, compared to infidelity or abuse, proved that dry wells of loneliness lurk beneath the surface of the most equitable couplings. Although I'd harped on Richard's dismissive attitude toward my work, what I felt, but couldn't quite express, was that the reasons I make *brodo*, admittedly unresolved, now seemed part of what my partner didn't understand about me. He had thrown my *pridefulness*—a character failing I might be better off without, but one I'd believed he appreciated—down the drain along with the broth. *Prideful*, after all, means *arrogant*, but also *dignified*, and possessing *self-respect*.

FOR REPARATION, we agreed that Richard would make a pot of *brodo* in order to comprehend how I felt when he threw mine out. This hasn't happened yet. Nor have I whipped up another batch myself. When I do—if I do—I am going to use capon. ☉