

# Cooking up Comfort



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White Bean and Kale Soup

## A TRIBUTE TO FOODS THAT NOURISH US FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Alyssa Thayer

WHenever I see comfort food on a menu, it's often accompanied by some version of mac 'n' cheese or chicken pot pie. While these are undeniably delicious, they're not necessarily *my* comfort foods. For me, no matter the time of day, season or meal, my go-to is fried egg and rice. For my husband, it's perfectly crisp sourdough grilled cheese. As

a rule, comfort foods tend to be unpretentious, simple to make and deeply satisfying.

The interesting thing about the category of "comfort food" is it isn't one size fits all. It's uniquely suited to each individual. It's the foods we turn to when we're in need of respite, in search of celebration, or feeling a little under the weather. They are a full sensory experience of smells and flavors that evoke "home" and the people who've cared for us along the way.



Matzo Ball Soup

I recently spoke to a fellow foodie friend on her 42nd birthday and asked her how she was celebrating. She laughed and said, "I've asked my mom to make me turkey meatballs. I just love them — she used to make them for me when I was little."

For many of us, food memories transcend time and space. Just one whiff of cinnamon and apples and I'm standing on a chair stirring applesauce in my childhood home. One bite of sweet potato casserole



Alyssa and Baya eating popcorn out of recycled yogurt containers

and I'm sitting on a vinyl banquet watching the 49ers with my dad. The power of these memories comes from their associations. They evolve way beyond just delightful dishes to become living tributes to all that we hold dear. While everyone's discrete web of lineage and memories ultimately defines their comfort foods, there seem to be a few that are universally accepted. Most cultures have some version of grandma's chicken soup. No matter whether it came from a Nonna, an Abuela or an Oma, whether it was veggie broth, bone broth or anything in between, the sentiment remains the same. My grandma's signature was a salty chicken broth poured over fluffy little homemade matzo balls. The combination was divine, like a steaming hot bowl of pure love.

With each chapter of our lives comes a changing set of circumstances: new people, new jobs and new communities. When things feel foreign and unfamiliar, these recipes become wells of comfort we can dip into at any time.

Whenever I got a cold as a child, my mom would bring me uma-mi-filled miso soup. And to this day, if I start to feel a sore throat coming on, I check the fridge to ensure I have a good supply of red miso paste. During the chillier months, I make this soup for my husband and add rice noodles for my kids, which they slurp up like noisy little piglets. In this way, the tradition and recipe live on. And perhaps one day when my boys are older, they, too, might comfort someone they love with their own rendition of the dish.

Often, my food memories are sparked by a time of year. A crisp autumn day with a hint of wood fire in the air tells me it's time to

put tamale pie on my menu. And during dark winter months, I find solace in buying a big bright box of clementines, reminding me of days spent on the ski mountain with my grandfather. We would pack our lunch of fresh bread and cheese into his "rucksack" and punctuate each meal with segments of juicy sweet clementines and hunks of dark chocolate.

One of my favorite parts about writing this column over the last few years has been hearing about family traditions and tastes of home, from my very first article in *County Lines* about Mariella Frazier of Heritage Flour Baking Company, who began her business by recreating the Maltese pastries she so fondly remembered from her youth, to my recent article with Denise Schatz of Aunt Mamie's Italian Specialties, who spoke of her grandmother's special "Sunday Sauce," which was always simmering away on the stove when she visited. Both these women, as well as countless others, were inspired by the power of food to heal us, bring us together and ground us in our heritage.

As we turn the page into the fresh New Year, let's find comfort in the foods that nourish our souls and the openness and pride to share them with others. We don't all have to love the same foods, but beautiful things happen when we get around the table!

### Recipes

*Here are three wonderful recipes to try. Each has its own origin story and has been made countless times for family and friends. Try them, share them and make them your own!*

### Hippy Pop

Growing up, my life was pretty simple and pretty analog. Long before it was trendy, my family ate from the land and cooked from scratch. We didn't have a microwave or a dishwasher, you'd be hard-pressed to find processed foods lying around and our pantry staples came from the bulk bins at the local health food store.

Often, making the food was as much of an activity as eating it —



Alyssa with Grandfather Eric Simon skiing Zermatt, Switzerland



Hunter learning to grate cheese



Gavin and Hunter try nutritional yeast on popcorn



from pressing our own tortillas to rolling our own sushi to popping our own popcorn on the stove. So, while most of my friends were unwrapping bags of butter-flavored popcorn and tossing them into the microwave, we were measuring kernels into a cast iron skillet and shaking it over a flame until the popping had stopped. After the popcorn was popped, we would top it with tamari and nutritional yeast (also not your typical household ingredients at this time) and enjoy it one heaping handful at a time.

Recently, I found a recipe from the *New York Times* for a similar dish called “hippie popcorn.” It made me chuckle and think my mama had been onto something, just ahead of the times.

Serves 3-4

- ½ C. popcorn kernels
- 2 T. high heat oil (coconut, canola or avocado work well)
- 2-3 T. tamari
- 3 T. nutritional yeast (plus more as you go)

Warm a heavy-bottom pan or skillet over medium-high heat, add oil and wait for it to start to simmer. Pour in your kernels and place a lid over the pan.

*Note:* If you're like me and don't have a perfect fitting lid for your cast iron pan, don't worry. It doesn't need to be a tight seal; it just needs to cover the pan enough to keep the popcorn from flying out.

As you begin to hear the popping, start to carefully shake/agitate the pan. This will help the kernels heat evenly and ensure they're not burning on one side.

The popping will increase and then finally peter out after a few minutes.

Once the popping comes to a halt, carefully remove lid and transfer the popcorn into a large bowl.

*Note:* It's not uncommon for there to be a few final rogue pops that send things flying (this always makes me jump and gets full belly laughs from my kids). It's all part of the fun.

Carefully drizzle tamari over top and sprinkle nutritional yeast all around. Toss until well coated. Try to spread the tamari out when pouring, otherwise you'll have a few pieces that are extremely salty and the rest with no flavor.

I often do a few cycles of flavoring, tossing and eating as I go.

And if you'd like to add a little melted butter or oil to help the nutritional yeast stick to your popcorn, go right ahead. There are no hard and fast rules, as long as you devour it contentedly in front of a favorite flick.

*Air Popper:* If you happen to own a super cool air popper, you can make the popcorn that way and simply top it with the tamari and nutritional yeast after.

## Yellow Springs Farm — Ricotta Ravioli

This ricotta ravioli pays homage to our Sicilian grandparents, our travels to Sicily, and the steamy days spent producing goat milk ricotta at Yellow Springs Farm. We prepare it with a cherished wooden board

made for us by family now passed. The picture shows part of the process of how we make it. It takes a while, but it's totally worth it!

– Catherine Renzi, former cheese maker and owner of Yellow Springs Farm

Serves 4

*For the ravioli filling:*

- 1, 1b. fresh goat milk ricotta, drained overnight if wet
- Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 tsp. freshly grated lemon zest (from about half a lemon)
- 1 C. freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, plus more for serving
- 1 large egg, plus 1 large egg lightly beaten with 2 T. water
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

*For the ravioli dough:*

- 3 C. all-purpose flour (Tip: 00 flour makes a softer, tender pasta)
- 2 large eggs
- 2 egg yolks
- 1 T. olive oil (optional)



*Step 1: Make the filling:*

In a large bowl combine ricotta, nutmeg, lemon zest, cheese and one beaten egg. Season to taste with salt and pepper, stir well and set aside.

*Step 2: Make the dough:*

Mound the flour on a clean work surface, such as a wooden board, and create a well in the center. Place eggs, egg yolks and oil (if using) in the center. Using a fork, whisk the eggs and oil together and slowly start dragging the flour into the egg mixture. Knead by hand until all the ingredients are well combined and the dough is smooth and elastic, about 10 minutes.

*Alternatively:* Place all the ingredients in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook. With the mixer on medium speed, knead the dough until smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap or place it in a covered bowl and let it rest at room temperature for at least 30 minutes.



*Step 3: Roll out the pasta:*

Set up a pasta machine and turn it to the largest opening. Cut off pieces of dough about the size of an egg. Working with one piece of dough at a time, roll the dough into sheets about 1/8-inch thick. You can also use a floured wooden rolling pin.

*Step 4: Assemble the Ravioli:*

Lay one pasta sheet flat on a lightly floured work surface and determine approximately where the halfway point is lengthwise. Use a pastry brush to lightly wet half the dough with the remaining egg (lightly beaten with water). Spoon mounds of the filling, about 2 teaspoons each, onto half of the wet side of the dough, leaving about a half inch between the mounds. Fold the dry half of the sheet over lengthwise to cover the filling.

Press the pasta sheets together to seal the edges around the filling and press out any excess air. Use a pastry cutter or knife to cut individual ravioli. As you cut out the ravioli, place them on a plate or baking sheet sprinkled with flour to keep them from sticking. Repeat with the remaining pasta and filling.

*Step 5: Cook the Ravioli*

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the ravioli all at once and stir a few times to submerge and separate them. Cook uncovered at a gentle boil until the pasta is just tender to the bite, 2 to 3 minutes.

Remove the ravioli with a slotted spoon when ready. They will break easily if you use a sieve or strainer.

Drain the ravioli thoroughly and serve with desired sauce. You can top it with a fresh tomato sauce or browned butter and sage with grated cheese.

## Kimberton Whole Foods White Bean and Kale Soup

Wonderfully warming and filling, this soup came about when my son, Colin, and I were trying out different soup recipes in the cafe, and he perfected this to be a customer favorite.

When our five children were young, the vegetables in our garden would always get put to good use in a big pot of soup to enjoy around the family table. I truly enjoy making soups and stews. The delicious aromas fill the whole house and provide such a comforting meal. We are happy to share this recipe with you.

–Pat Brett, co-founder of Kimberton Whole Foods and co-author of the *Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook* with Courtney Diener-Stokes

## White Bean and Kale Soup

Featured in the *Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook: A Family History with Recipes* (Hickory Grove Publishing).

Serves 8-10

- 2 C. dried white lima beans, soaked and drained
- 2-3 T. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped small
- 2 C. celery, thinly sliced, including some leaves for extra flavor
- 4 small carrots (or 2 large), sliced into coins
- 6 C. water or vegetable broth
- 1 T. Himalayan pink salt, plus more to taste
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 whole nutmeg, grated or ½ tsp. dried nutmeg
- 1 bunch of curly green or Lacinato (or Tuscan) kale, stripped from stems and sliced in ribbons

Begin by soaking the dried lima beans overnight or for at least an hour.

In a large stockpot, heat a thin layer of olive oil over medium heat. Add onions, celery and carrots and cook for about 5 minutes, until softened but not browned. Add water or broth, lima beans, salt and pepper. Grate in about half of the whole nutmeg. Bring to a boil, stir well, and reduce heat to simmer.

Check soup at 15-minute intervals, stirring occasionally, until the beans are soft to the bite. Add kale and more salt to taste. Stir well and simmer for another 15 minutes.

Grate a bit of fresh nutmeg over top of soup when you serve for extra aroma and flavor. ♦

*Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table. This is her last column.*



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