# Sanctuary in a Bowl

## SOUP'S ON THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Liz Tarditi

THE HOLIDAYS ARRIVE WITH A PARTICULAR KIND of momentum — parties stacking up, errands multiplying, and traditions insisting on attention even when we're already stretched thin. Somewhere in the middle of the rush, most of us start craving the opposite of all that sparkle and noise: something warm, slow and restorative.

Soup has always filled that role. It's a small sanctuary in a bowl, a reminder that comfort doesn't need to be complicated to be deeply felt. It's also one of the oldest through-lines in human cooking. Long before there were holiday schedules, electric lights or grocery lists, there was broth bubbling over a fire, plus whatever grains, roots, bones and vegetables a household could spare.

"Stone Soup," that old tale of strangers coaxing a village to contribute what little they had, rings especially true this time of year.

Soup has always been communal, resourceful and generous. It meets people where they are.

This month's Brandywine Table features five soups that embody that spirit in different ways. Two come from Ron's Original Bar & Grille in Exton, a local institution where scratch-made still means something. Not everyone has time during the holidays to caramelize onions for half an hour or brown tomato paste until it sweetens and darkens — but Ron's does.

Their French onion soup leans into the old-world method: onions cooked slowly until deeply golden, enriched with wine and stock, and finished under a bubbling cap of cheese. It's comfort with a touch of ceremony. Their Italian cream of tomato soup builds its richness the same way Italian grandmothers have for generations — start with paste, give it patience and let the flavors unfold.

Balancing those are three soups made for home kitchens, each offering a different kind of solace. An adaptable potato leek soup is rustic and chunky, silky and pureed, or chilled into a refined vichyssoise for the rare quiet winter evening. Bazillion bean soup that makes its own broth as it simmers blends beans and vegetables as time turns them into something hearty and sustaining. And yes, even a nod to some storytelling with a classic borscht from the real Alice's Restaurant! The bright, earthy soup that shows up in European kitchens and American counterculture alike. (Arlo Guthrie wasn't wrong — sometimes borscht really is exactly what you want.)

Together, these soups invite you to slow down. To step out of the holiday buzz for a moment and let something warm and honest take its place. When the days grow colder and the calendar grows louder, a pot of soup — homemade or picked up from a kitchen like Ron's — reminds us that comfort is still simple. And it's waiting on the stove.



## Ron's Original French Onion Soup

*Deeply caramelized onions and a splash of wine turn humble ingredients into gold. Under a bubbling lid of Gruyère or provolone, this timeless soup is a simple luxury that never goes out of style.*

Serves 8 to 10

**Soup:**

1 gal. beef stock
2 bay leaves
1 oz. fresh thyme (about 1 packed C. whole sprigs)
¼ C. demi-glace
6 oz. clarified butter (about ¾ C.)
4 lbs. mixed onions (red, white, yellow), thinly sliced
1 T. minced garlic
1 T. kosher salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 T. brown sugar
½ C. port wine
2 C. merlot

**For topping each serving:**

1½-inch-thick slice baguette, toasted
3 thick slices cheese (Gruyère, provolone or blend to overlap bowl)

In a large stockpot, combine stock, bay leaves, thyme and demi-glace. Bring to a boil, then reduce by about half.

In another large pot, melt butter over medium-low heat. Add onions, garlic, salt, pepper and brown sugar. Cook slowly until onions are deeply caramelized (about 25–30 minutes), stirring to prevent sticking. Add both wines. Increase heat to medium and cook until wine has reduced by half.

Strain the reduced stock to remove herbs, then pour into the onion mixture. Return to a gentle simmer and cook 10 minutes to blend flavors.

Ladle into oven-safe crocks, leaving room to top each with a toasted baguette slice and overlapping cheese. Broil until browned and bubbling. Serve hot.

## Ron's Original Italian Cream of Tomato Soup

*A silky, richly flavored tomato soup built from caramelized paste and herbs, finished with cream and tender pasta for a hearty Italian twist. Ron notes that for a gluten-free version, use gluten-free pasta.*

Serves 8 to 10

½ lb. butter, divided
2 C. chopped onions
1 T. minced garlic
½ T. granulated garlic
1, 6-oz. can tomato paste
2 T. sea salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
½ tsp. thyme
2 T. dried parsley
2 qt. chicken stock
1, 14-oz. can crushed tomatoes
½ C. cornstarch
1 pt. heavy cream
1 oz. fresh basil (about ½ C. chopped)
6 oz. cooked orecchiette pasta

In a large pot, melt half the butter over medium heat. Add onions and both kinds of garlic and sauté until soft and lightly caramelized.

Stir in tomato paste and cook about 10 minutes, stirring often, until the paste darkens and forms browned edges (to build the soup's depth of flavor).

Add salt, pepper, thyme, parsley, chicken stock and crushed tomatoes to deglaze the pan. Bring to a rapid boil and cook 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, melt the remaining butter and whisk in cornstarch to form a smooth roux.

Add the roux and cream to the tomato mixture and simmer 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened. Stir in fresh basil and cooked pasta. Serve hot.

## Crockpot-Friendly Potato Leek Soup

*Few recipes are as forgiving or adaptable as potato leek soup. With the same ingredients, you can create a rustic crockpot comfort, a velvety dinner-party starter, or a chilled vichyssoise in warmer months. Once you know the base, it becomes a blank canvas for whatever the season — or the cook — has in mind.*

Serves 10 to 12

2 qt. organic chicken stock
3 large russet (baking) potatoes, peeled and halved
2 medium red (waxy) potatoes, scrubbed and diced ¼-½ in. (skin on)
2–3 bunches leeks, white parts only, trimmed, well-washed and sliced into half-moons
2 sticks salted butter
1 qt. heavy cream
Salt and white pepper to taste

***For frizzled leeks garnish:*** Cut white/light green parts of leeks lengthwise into matchsticks and toss with a tiny bit of olive oil. Air fry for 5 minutes until crispy, or fry in hot oil for 1 to 2 minutes. Remove with tongs and drain on paper towels. Arrange as garnish.

Pour stock into a large crockpot or slow cooker. As you peel and cut each russet potato, drop the pieces directly into the liquid to prevent browning. Add diced red potatoes, chopped leeks and butter. Cover and cook on low for 8 hours or on high for 4 hours, until the russets are fork-tender but not falling apart.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the russets (not the diced reds) in batches to a blender, adding enough hot leek broth and some cream to blend smoothly. Fill the blender only halfway (hot liquid expands). Pulse a few seconds (over-pureeing makes potatoes gluey). Return each batch to the crockpot, continuing until all russets are blended and reincorporated.

Allow to come back to heat for about 30 minutes before serving. (Unused portions should be chilled quickly in an ice bath before storing cold.)

Stir in any remaining cream. Season with salt and white pepper to taste. The red potatoes remain in small chunks for texture. Garnish with leek frizzles or any toppings for a loaded baked potato.

***For a refined vichyssoise:*** Make a day in advance. Peel all potatoes at the start, puree the entire soup and pass through a fine-mesh sieve. Then chill quickly over an ice bath. Cover and refrigerate overnight. Serve cold. Garnish: caviar, smoked salmon or trout, lemon oil.

## Bazillion Bean Soup

*This soup bridges the Depression-era thrift of my grandmothers and the comfort of my cooking for my own daughter — simple ingredients turning into something rich and sustaining. As it simmers, it makes its own savory broth, filling the house with a warmth that travels through generations. My kid loved the name, so she forgot all about the veggies!*

Serves 10 to 12

1, 20-oz. bag mixed dry soup beans, artificial flavor packet discarded (or 2 heaping C. mixed beans from bulk), fully hydrated after a 1- to 2-day soak
Water, as needed to cover
1–2 lb. bacon, chopped (measure with your heart)
1 large turnip, diced
2 carrots, chopped
1 onion, diced
1 large head (about 20 cloves) garlic, chopped
1 tsp. kosher salt, more to taste

Soak the beans in a large pot, covering with 2–3 inches of water, for 1–2 days, changing the water as needed. If your mix includes large white lima beans (butter beans), give them the full soaking time. Drain the beans and set aside.

In a large soup pot, cook the bacon over medium-high heat until lightly browned and the fat has rendered. Remove the bacon with a slotted spoon and set aside.

In the bacon fat, add the diced turnip and carrots and cook over medium-low heat about 5 minutes, scraping the fond as the veggies sweat (a flat-edged wooden spatula helps). Add the onion and cook 3 minutes more, then stir in the chopped garlic and diced potatoes. *Pro tip:* When chopping vegetables for soup, match the size of your dice to the size of the beans. A spoonful that holds many elements at once is more satisfying.

Add the drained beans to the pot and mix well. Cover completely with about 2 inches water, again, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot. Add the kosher salt and reserved bacon.

Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Using a slotted spoon, skim the grey scum from the top. Cook 4 to 6 hours, stirring occasionally and adding more water as needed, until the beans are tender. Test by biting a larger bean (texture should be velvety not floury). For a thicker texture to the soup, continue simmering until some of the smaller beans break down and the soup becomes stew-like.

Garnish with plenty of shredded cheese and crusty bread … and maybe even more bacon.

## Alice's Restaurant Cabbage Borscht

*The Alice of Arlo Guthrie's song "Alice's Restaurant Massacree" operated a few food spots in the Berkshire Mountains years ago and authored a cookbook that included this hearty and easy recipe. Our editor, Jo Anne Durako, made it each winter for many years. Can be made with vegetarian stock, but must include a dollop of sour cream on top.*

Serves 8

6 C. beef bone broth or vegetarian stock
Meat from the bone broth
1 tsp. each salt and pepper
1, 28-oz. can tomatoes, with liquid
1 small head cabbage, shredded
½ C. raisins
2 onions, chopped
Juice of 1 lemon, more to taste
2 T. sugar, more to taste
Sour cream
Optional: chopped beets, carrots, potatoes, caraway seeds

In a large pot, combine the beef bone broth and broth meat, along with the salt and pepper.

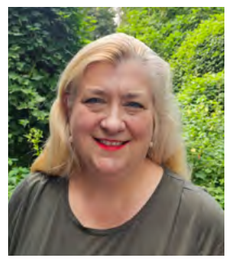
Next add the canned tomatoes with their liquid, shredded cabbage, raisins and chopped onions.

Place on low heat and cook slowly for an hour.

Add the lemon juice and sugar, and cook for another 15 minutes. Taste and adjust for sweetness or sourness, adding more lemon or sugar as needed.

Serve in large bowls with a large dollop of sour cream. ♦

*Liz Tarditi is a chef and wine specialist with more than 30 years of experience in food, wine and event planning. She holds degrees from Villanova University and from a Seattle culinary arts program founded by a Certified French Master Chef, where she trained in a classic brigade-style kitchen. Liz later ran her own catering company and has worked as a wine specialist in Pennsylvania. She brings her training and lifelong passion for seasonal, approachable cooking to Brandywine Table.*



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## Finishes That Make Soup Shine

Toppings aren't just decoration. They transform a humble bowl into something memorable. A sprinkle here, a drizzle there, and suddenly the kitchen smells warmer, the soup tastes deeper and everyone thinks you did more work than you actually did.

For toppers, think in contrasts: crispy against creamy, bright against rich, sharp against mellow. A handful of croutons, toasted nuts or seeds, or a quick tangle of frizzled leeks gives texture that keeps each spoonful interesting. Herbs (fresh, not dried) wake up even the quietest broth. Dill, chives, parsley, thyme and basil all have different personalities. Just drop them in at the last second so they stay vibrant.

A swirl of something silky — cream, olive oil, chili crisp, browned butter — adds aroma and visual drama. A spoonful of pesto, tapenade or salsa verde can turn a familiar soup into something entirely new. Even pantry staples like lemon zest, cracked pepper, smoked paprika or a splash of vinegar can lift the whole bowl with almost no effort.

And don't forget the sidekicks. Good bread, toasted or warmed, belongs with almost every soup. Shredded or shaved cheeses melt into a gentle richness. A dollop of sour cream or yogurt softens bold flavors. And if you happen to have leftover bacon, well … no one has ever complained.

Toppings are tiny gestures, but they're also invitations to slow down, savor and enjoy the small transformation that happens when comfort food gets just a bit of extra care.


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