

Medley, Melody
March & April 2022

When my sons were young, and finances tight, I kept a sturdy plastic container in the freezer. After meals, the container received the leftover treasures: vegetables and broths, meats and gravies. When the container could hold no more, I added water, pepper, and herbs on hand to make what I called “a medley”. Country bread and apple slices filled out the meal. No one complained. No one said, “Hey, didn’t I see these parsnips somewhere else?” The medley served us well for a number of non-consecutive nights. Our budget smiled upon my ingenuity. The scent of the soup, burbling all day in a pot on the stove, blanketed the house with coziness. It didn’t matter that I had spent little time on preparation.

Not long ago, on a wintry, sunny day, a new friend escorted me to her family’s ranch just off Route 230, tucked below Jelm Mountain to the southwest and the lumbering Sheep Mountain to the north and west. Joyce had agreed to be interviewed for the book I am writing, eagerly inviting me to conduct the interview in her home, her family’s property abutting the small ranch where her dear friend and horseback riding instructor—Eleanor Prince, the subject of my book—started Sodergreen Horsemanship School. Joyce and her husband invited me into their home with the usual warmth and exuberance of Wyoming ranchers. I felt like an old and valued friend.

“I put together lunch for us,” Joyce announced. I fussed that she had gone to a great deal of bother for me. “Oh, no,” she responded, “I just made soup.” She made having a guest sound so easy. Lately, I had been hearing this fuss-dismissive phrase from other Wyoming women—“I’ll just make up some soup.”

But first, Joyce would take me down to the Laramie River, a character in the lives of these ranch neighbors. As we tromped through the snow and watched our step at the river’s icy bank, Joyce filled the frigid air with anecdotes and histories of the homesteaders, passers-through, and the “old barn”, a majestic structure built large and stout for the horses needing rest at the stagecoach stops of the 1800s. Returning to the house, we dropped our coats, hats, and mittens by the door, wiped our chilled noses, and entered the big room that served as entryway, kitchen, and dining area. It was one of those spaces that speaks, “Welcome, make yourself at home, and stay awhile. The aroma of the hearty, spicy, long simmering soup encircled me, tricking me into believing she had spent more time than implied by the “just” of her earlier soup-related comment.

We sat to eat. In the simple chatter while bowls were filled and cheese and crackers were passed, I again mentioned that Joyce should not have gone to such bother. As seems typical these days in my Wyoming life, I heard what is becoming a familiar response. “Oh, it was easy to make, just a few ingredients, a simple recipe.” And of course, “I just threw into the pot things I had on hand.” The casual litany of the soup crafter. What we slurped was more than that. It was an artistic and balanced swirl of tastes and smells. It was darn good. I wasn’t hungry when we tromped through the snow to the riverbank. Now, lifting my spoon, I was ravenous. Of course, I asked for the recipe. That’s what we do when we experience a good soup, this one smacking of mountain air, hard and honest work, and friendship. And yes, just a few ingredients. With a touch of love.

I read somewhere and will attest to the fact that naturally curly hair, even the gray kind, holds scents. Hours after I have baked chocolate chip cookies, I will turn my head just so, and someone will sniff the air and remark on the smell of cookies from the oven. The evening of my visit with Joyce, I could smell her soup if I turned my head just so. And of course, I continued to do so.

Ask cooks the secret behind the preparation of a good soup, and they, like Joyce, will brush off compliments of culinary talent. There is no set recipe for soup, no set process. Make a few casual decisions about what should fill the pot, dump in everything in any order, and simmer for however long. Serve in a bowl or mug, and slurp with or without a spoon. Soup making, they will say, is an opportunity to color outside the line or to sing off key. Professional chefs might show disdain for these guidelines, but I bet on a night off, feet slipped into snuggly slippers, a light snow falling outside, a handful of this and a little bit of that and a wee touch of thyme is their melody.

The quick preparation and subsequent sharing of soup seems to be a theme that touches my life these days. Soup is an oddity. No fussing necessary. No rules regarding ingredients or order. It begs for one simple vessel. The concoction obediently sits atop the stove all day. Silent, but for the break of an occasional boiling bubble. And then, the soup is shared. That is the key: the invitation to receive and sup.

I think here only of hot soup. Although I love a chilled gazpacho on a sunny day, I must admit that cold soup does not fit into this conversation. Hot soup is for ridding one's body of the chilblains. It settles tummies and soothes symptoms of cold or flu. It is for comfort and for recovery. I think of nothing grander after battling the Wyoming wind and single-digit days than wrapping my hands around a bowl of steamy soup and bringing it to my nose to sniff, thus thawing fingers and a nearly frost-bitten face. Sheer bliss, which cannot be ushered forth by that particular soup made famous by my French-speaking ancestors. Hopefully, it is hot soup that can be traced in my family lineage. Supposedly, there is physical proof that Neanderthals used hot rocks to boil water and bones, for a drinkable broth. The medieval Europeans preferred their soup over toasted bread.

Wherever I lately turn, I hear—in response to the announcement of duress, pain, suffering, illness, or sadness—the generous words, “I’ll make them a pot of soup!” A pronouncement of the utmost level of kindness and caring, with a heaping handful of love. Is it only of Wyoming? Might this profound gesture of love be common across our country? I pray so. Do you, dear reader, remember the children’s book, *Stone Soup*? A wonderful, inviting soup made with a simple stone. If you haven’t read the book, do so. It’s all about love and sharing and, well, soup.

A memory lingers. I was in high school, stranded unexpectedly at the home of a friend. My friend’s mother quickly heated up some leftover soup which she topped with grated cheese. We ate on folding TV trays in a warm and cozy room, classical music softly playing on the stereo, my friend’s mother patient and calm in the midst of a logistical mix-up. There were no mountains, no ranches, no Laramie River yet in my life. Only the Chesapeake Bay and dune

grass and the world's largest naval base. But there was soup, and a kind woman who served it, with a sprinkling of love.