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SACRED FEASTS

FROM A MONASTERY KITCHEN

RECIPES *and*
REFLECTIONS

From the Best-Selling Author of
From a Monastery Kitchen

Brother Victor-Antoine d'Avila-Latourrette



LIGUORI, MISSOURI

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JANUARY 1 ♦ The New Year

JANUARY is the birth month of the year. Once more we complete another full life cycle as we say goodbye to the old year, and then suddenly we're face-to-face with the new. What will the new year bring, we all ask? What surprises does it have in store? We enter into something new, and it inescapably makes us wonder about its unpredictability, its possible surprises, its uncertain future, its final purpose, and its eventual outcome.

Today is also the feast of Mary, the Mother of God. Whatever the year has in store, it's a good omen that we begin its counting under her unfailing protection. Mary reminds us that all time is God's time; we must not cling to it as a possession, but as something to use wisely during our earthly life just as she and Christ did during their time on Earth. As we begin the new year, it's good to seriously consider how we use the length of time given to us, how we spend our days, and what our ultimate goals are. So New Year's Day is not only an occasion for celebration, but also for serious reflection on the purpose of our lives and for resolutions on enhancing our future days and making them richer with gifts from the Spirit of God.

Since just before Christmas Day—over a week now—our monastery kitchen has been busy with festal table preparations as the celebration of the Lord's Incarnation is expressed in our food arrangements. Today, in spite of its being New Year's Day and the solemnity of the Mother of God, I decided I needed contrast to our festive meals of the last few days. I'm deliberately celebrating with food of rustic origins, hearty and soul-warming, just what we need to face the cold temperatures. Rustic meals have a charm and refinement all their own. There's something so friendly, so simple and earthy, about them. They're not fancy, but they are appetizing and delicious, they easily warm our hearts, and they go a long way toward inspiring conviviality at a gathering.

Today's meal consists of a hearty hot soup that can be started the day before, a cheese



*January,
the first month
of the year,
like its namesake,
looks back
over the past,
and forward
to the future,
with hope and
good resolutions.*

ANONYMOUS



fondue, a mixed-green salad, and a plain flan for dessert. Fondue's communal nature as a meal makes it an appealing and irresistible dish, so appropriate for New Year's Day. Besides, it's easy, economical, and fun to share with friends.

All in all, this rustic holiday meal—a mirror of our simple lifestyle—has nothing to envy of more sumptuous celebrations. The soup and the dessert, though not elaborate, take a bit more time and can be prepared a day ahead; in fact, the soup usually tastes better the next day. The fondue and the salad demand less time and can be done on the same day.

PASTA E FAGIOLI SOUP (Bean and Pasta Soup)

6–8 SERVINGS

1 pound dried white navy beans
8 cups cold water
3 leeks, trimmed at the top,
thinly sliced
2 potatoes, peeled and cubed
1 large carrot, peeled and cubed
1 celery stalk, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon fresh or dried rosemary
1 tablespoon fresh or dried thyme
2 cups Italian dry white wine
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
1 cup small macaroni or other
tubular pasta
5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 Place beans and water in a large soup pot and soak overnight, covered, for 10 to 12 hours. The next day add vegetables, rosemary, thyme, and wine. Bring soup to a boil, then lower heat to medium. Cook slowly for about 2 hours. Cover. Add more water if necessary.

2 Using a ladle, set aside 1 cup of the bean-vegetables mixture. Also set aside separately 2 cups of the liquid.

3 Make sure there is sufficient liquid in the soup. Just before ready to serve, add pasta and simmer over low heat until pasta is cooked. Stir frequently.

4 Place in a blender the cup of bean-vegetable mixture, the 2 cups of liquid, and the olive oil and blend thoroughly. When pasta is cooked, add this mixture. Reheat a bit and serve hot.

After the hearty bean and pasta soup, serve the fondue and basic mixed salad. Fondue is a marvelous dish to serve on a special occasion such as New Year's Day, when friends can gather informally around the fireplace and share something delicious in an intimate setting. There's nothing like shared food to enhance the moment and the pleasure of the company.

CHEESE FONDUE

6–8 SERVINGS

2 garlic cloves
2½ cups dry white wine
2 cups grated Gruyère cheese
2 cups Swiss, or other cheese
3 tablespoons French brandy
1 tablespoon cornstarch
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
Pinch of nutmeg
1 crusty French baguette cut into bite-size pieces (warm in oven if necessary)

1 Crush garlic cloves and rub them on the surface of a medium-size iron pot or fondue pot. Pour wine into the pot, add cheese, and stir continuously over medium heat until cheese melts.

2 Mix brandy and cornstarch into a paste and add to cheese mixture. Continue stirring until the mixture achieves a creamy consistency. Season to taste with salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Stir well for several minutes. Place fondue pot over a wood stove or fondue flame and let your family and friends dip their bread with long forks into the fondue mixture. Accompany the fondue with a mixed-green salad.

BASIC MIXED SALAD

6–8 SERVINGS

1 head frisée (French curly endive), trimmed
1 bunch fresh watercress, trimmed with stems discarded
2 Belgian endives, leaves separated and halved lengthwise
1 small red onion, thinly sliced

VINAIGRETTE

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons red-wine vinegar
Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 Place salad greens in a large salad bowl. Just before serving, drizzle olive oil on top.

2 Toss to coat. Add vinegar, salt, and pepper to taste. Toss once more and serve.



FLAN A L'ANCIENNE (Flan Old-Fashioned Style)

8 SERVINGS

2½ cups milk
1 vanilla bean,
split lengthwise
½ cup sugar (taste and
add more if needed)
3 large eggs
2 egg yolks
½ cup sweetened
condensed milk
4 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon French brandy



1 Preheat oven to 350° F.

2 Heat milk in a medium-size pot over medium flame. Add vanilla-bean halves and stir until milk turns hot. Remove pot from heat, set it aside, and cover for 30 minutes.

3 Dissolve sugar in a medium-size nonstick skillet over low-medium heat, moving and shaking skillet to help sugar melt evenly. Continue cooking and stirring sugar until it melts and turns deep brown. Immediately pour dissolved sugar into 8 small ramekins (about 6-ounce custard bowls). Tilt each bowl to coat the bottom thoroughly. Let cool.

4 With a mixer, combine eggs, egg yolks, condensed milk, sugar, and brandy until mixture is perfectly smooth. Remove and discard vanilla bean; gradually whisk egg mixture into milk.

5 Pour the custard mixture into the ramekins. Divide evenly. Place the ramekins into a large oven pan with water covering the bottom half of the ramekins (*bain marie*, “water bath”). Place the pan in the oven with a sheet of foil covering the top of the ramekins. Cook the flan for about 30 to 40 minutes until done. Check its consistency with a thin knife or pin before removing the flan from the oven.

6 When done, remove the ramekins from the oven and allow the flan to cool over a rack. Chill for 2 hours, and then unmold the flan by carefully running a thin knife around the edges of the flan. When the flan feels loose, with great care turn each ramekin upside down onto a serving plate, release the flan, and serve.

JANUARY 13 ♦ Theophany of the Lord

THIS MORNING I arose a bit later than usual. While opening the porch door to let out our dog and cats, I realized the temperature was well below zero. The sun was shining and the sky was pale blue, but the brutally cold wind conveyed an air of gloom. This is January, after all. Mother Nature never lies: We hear her speak through symbols and signs, but her language and message is always clear and concise. I breathed the winter air deeply before closing the door, and instantly I recognized that unmistakable New York–New England air unique to our region. Our wintry air is undeniably fierce, cold, and at times savage, but it's also dry and clear and sometimes as soothing as a tonic. People who live in the countryside develop an awareness of these subtle daily changes in the air.

Today is the feast of the Theophany of the Lord, the feast that concludes and closes the Christmas cycle. It commemorates the manifestation of the divine Trinity during the moment of Christ's baptism in the Jordan. It's an unusual event: As Christ humbles himself seeking baptism from John, the Spirit descends upon him and the voice of the Father expresses his pleasure with his only son. For the first time, the three divine persons of the Trinity are visibly revealed in the New Testament. It's truly an ineffable mystery, the kind of mystery that encompasses and demands our entire assent and faith. God is so great, so transcendent, so beyond us—yet at the same time, through his becoming flesh and one of us, he is so very close to us.

Since the temperature is so cold and today's feast calls for something special, I decided yesterday that our soup of the day would be an unusual one not often made here and that won't be taken for granted by those who share it. It's much loved in the Mediterranean world and is made basically made of freshly roasted chestnuts. On a cold night, nothing beats the fragrance of freshly roasted chestnuts transformed into a delicious, hearty soup, the kind of soup that lingers for days in the memory of those who share it.

The appreciation of chestnuts is not so evident in American kitchens as it is in Europe. Perhaps it's a question of custom and tradition. It could also be because chestnut trees aren't as abundant in the United States as in Europe: Most of the chestnuts available in American supermarkets are imported from Italy or Spain.

Chestnut soup is a treat any time, but the glorious feast of the Theophany as a conclusion to our Christmas celebrations gives us a unique occasion to enjoy this superb, rich soup—a true delight to our palates.



*When the
waters saw you,
O God,
when the
waters saw you,
they were afraid;
the very deep
trembled.*

PSALM 77:16

CHESTNUT SOUP

6–8 SERVINGS

1 pound chestnuts in the shell
3 leeks, white and tender
green parts only, thinly sliced
6 tablespoons butter or
virgin olive oil
1 cup dry white wine
1 small acorn squash, peeled,
hollowed out, and cut in
small chunks
5 cups water
½ cup whole milk
Salt and freshly ground pepper



- 1** Preheat oven to 400° F.
- 2** Using a sharp knife, make an incision on the flat side of each chestnut. Lay chestnuts in a single layer on an ungreased baking sheet. Roast them for 15 to 20 minutes or until they turn fragrant. Remove sheet from oven and allow chestnuts to cool, then shell them and set apart the nutmeats.
- 3** Place leeks in a good-size soup pot and add 3 tablespoons of butter. Cook over low-medium heat, stirring continuously until leeks begin to sweat. Add wine and let it simmer for about 3 minutes. Add squash, all but ⅓ cup chestnuts, and water. Quickly bring mixture to a boil, then lower heat to low-medium and allow soup to simmer covered for another 20 to 25 minutes. Pour in milk and stir well. Allow to cool a bit.
- 4** Purée soup in batches in a blender until smooth. Pour soup back into pot and simmer over low heat. Season with salt and pepper to taste. If soup is too thick, thin with water or milk.
- 5** While soup simmers, melt remaining butter into a heavy skillet and sauté the remaining ⅓ cup of chestnuts. Add a dash of salt and pepper to taste, and stir continuously until chestnuts turn crisp and browned. Let stand. Serve soup in hot plates topped with crumbled chestnuts.

JANUARY 17 ♦ Saint Antony, the Father of Monks

WHOLIVE in a freezing-weather zone face the grim and harsh reality of winter in several ways. In a monastery, one can do more reading and prayer as well as indoor creative work such as writing. One may also spend extra time in the kitchen by a warm stove, simmering a nourishing soup or baking hearty breads and tarts. I try to do a bit of all these, sometimes while observing our cherished monastic silence and other times while listening to an inspiring Bach cello suite or Beethoven quartet, which in my view don't interfere with the silence. To the contrary, good music seems to enhance the silence.

Unpredictable weather, short days, and long, dark, frigid nights can have a deep effect on the psyche. Creativity—reading, writing, playing, walking, working on craft projects, or cooking—is key to dealing constructively with our somber winter days as it uplifts our spirits and renews our souls. Creativity can also enhance our relationship with God in prayer and with the people whose lives surround us.

Today the monastic calendar keeps the memory of Saint Antony, the father of monks and my patron saint. I've always loved Saint Antony, and his example of Christian monastic living never ceases to inspire my pilgrimage. He's truly a humble servant of Christ, whom he preferred above all, a wise desert father whose inner radiance continues to shine. From the inhospitable Egyptian desert of the third and fourth centuries, he taught monks to seek God alone, to center our entire monastic lives on God. This he practiced daily through continual prayer, meditation on the Word of God, manual labor, discipline, charity toward his neighbors, silence, and continual recollection of God. Through the example of his life, he imparted wisdom to his disciples and encouraged them to remain



*Do not fear then,
my children,
let Christ be
your life's breath,
and place all
your trust in Him.
Live as if dying daily.*

SAINT ATHANASIUS
LIFE OF SAINT ANTONY:
HIS LAST COUNSELS



faithful to their monastic calling. I'm very grateful to Saint Antony for many things, particularly for his strong yet gentle presence here in our own little desert. This is very comforting to me.

Since Saint Antony was a very frugal monk, what better way to honor him at the table tonight than with a frugal meal? I think he would be pleased with that. There is plenty of leftover soup from last night to reheat today and serve as it was yesterday, followed by a salad of fresh greens, a morsel of cheese, and wholesome bread.

During the winter more than any other time of year, we need to see and taste those salad greens, a promise of the forthcoming spring. Eating fresh salads throughout our long winters is a good remedy for the psyche.

Our only treat tonight is a simple fruit compote—a dessert that warms us in more ways than one. Warm compotes always seem so nurturing during the cold season.

SAINT ANTONY WARM FRUIT COMPOTE

6–8 SERVINGS

1 vanilla bean, halved lengthwise
½ cup sugar (add more if necessary;
follow your taste)
2 cups water
2 cups small dried apricots, whole
1 pound firm pears, peeled, seeded,
and halved
2 tablespoons pear liqueur

**OPTIONAL: 8 TEASPOONS
CRÈME FRAÎCHE OR HEAVY CREAM**

1 Cut vanilla bean lengthwise with a paring knife and scrape out seeds. Place bean, sugar, and water in a good-size pot. Stir and bring to a boil over medium heat.

2 Add apricots, pears, and liqueur. Cover and simmer slowly about 15 minutes. Stir from time to time. When fruits are cooked, turn off heat and cover again.

3 Check taste and add more sugar if needed. Keep compote hot to warm. Remove vanilla bean. Serve compote warm, reheating before serving if needed. As an option, top each serving with 1 teaspoon crème fraîche or heavy cream.

JANUARY 21 ♦ Green Soup

IT HAS SNOWED nonstop anew, a blustering storm that paralyzed our area for three days. The heavy snow, the blasting wind, and the freezing temperature all made me eager for one of those hot, comforting, winter soups. Why is it that on days like these one instinctively turns to thoughts of soup? On a bitterly cold day such as today, we could relinquish all sorts of other pleasures at the table, but not that of a comforting and heart-warming soup. On a cold winter night, a roaring fire, a glass of red wine, and a bowl or two of a delicious hot soup is all that's needed to sufficiently nurture and satisfy us.

A good soup goes a long way to nourish not only our bodies, but also our souls. As I feed the corner wood stove in the kitchen and move around seeking more logs, I think about what kind of soup should feed the monastic table tonight. Something simple, light, and quick, with lots of comforting flavors and texture we could enjoy at supper right after our singing of Vespers.

Monks, professing a frugal way of life, never discard leftovers and always make a point of starting with them in planning the day's menu, so I start by searching for leftovers. Most of what I find this afternoon are fresh and frozen greens and some leeks in our cellar, so I decided to prepare a traditional green soup. Green soups are full of vitamins and minerals, and they're always delicious.



*Beautiful soup,
so rich and green,
Waiting in a
hot tureen!
Who for such
dainties would
not stoop?
Soup of the evening,
beautiful soup!*

LEWIS CARROLL



The main ingredients will be leeks harvested in November from our own garden and kept in our cellar, fresh escarole, and frozen Swiss chard and potatoes—these last two were also from our garden. I'll add minced garlic cloves to bring an aromatic touch to the soup.

The beauty and practicality of a good soup is that one can make it in sufficiently large portions to last two or three meals. In a monastery, just as in an ordinary home, monks don't mind repeating the same menu for several days as long as it hits the spot.

A GREEN SOUP

6–8 SERVINGS

10 tablespoons olive oil
6 garlic cloves, minced
(more if you wish)
3 leeks, including the tender green parts, finely sliced
1 pound escarole greens, coarsely chopped
1 pound Swiss chard greens, top part only (or spinach or kale if you prefer), coarsely chopped
3 quarts water
2 bouillon cubes (vegetarian or other if you prefer)
4 medium-size potatoes, peeled and diced
Salt and freshly ground pepper
Grated Parmesan cheese

1 Pour oil into a good-size pot, add garlic and leeks, and sauté over low-medium heat for about 3 minutes, stirring often. Add escarole and Swiss chard greens. Continue to stir for another 2 to 3 minutes.

2 Add water, bouillon cubes, and potatoes, cover pot, and bring the soup to a quick boil. Lower heat to medium and allow soup to cook for 25 to 30 minutes. Add salt and pepper and more water if necessary. Lower heat to low-medium and simmer soup, covered, for another 10 minutes. Stir occasionally.

3 When soup is done, turn off heat and allow it to sit, covered, for about 5 minutes before serving. Serve soup hot and sprinkle grated cheese over each portion.

4 Reheat leftovers the following day, when the soup should taste even better.

Imprimi Potest:
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