



My gut is strangely warm...

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

I love soups – arguably the most holistic dish, capable of offering the most complete experience whether one eats to live, or lives to eat. To many, the soup in a Chinese meal is merely a supporting cast. For some, it is to facilitate smooth swallowing of solid food. For others, it is to replace the sodium lost during perspiration. And perhaps for those who work in offices with over-efficient air-conditioning, it helps to prevent hypothermia. But for me, soup-drinking is all these and much, much more. Drinking a bowl of responsibly-made soup is not only a sensual, but sensuous experience, able to evoke waves of sighs signifying a deep sense of contentment, fulfilment and internal peace, an experience as ethereal as drinking a bottle of fine Burgundy. Yet soups are also special because even a humble bowl of home-made soup can produce an all-round sense of warmth and comfort.

My gastronomic comrades are all too familiar with my yearning for soup, whether as a starter, main course or the only course. Occasionally, I even order soup for dessert. My wife discovered soon after our marriage

that for me, any meal without soup is not considered a balanced one. This affection for soup dates back to my childhood days when much time was spent under the care of my maternal grandmother. A typical Cantonese, she made sure that a big bowl of soup was the focus of every meal. Very soon, I became so attached to my soup that any meal without it felt incomplete. Perhaps this is why despite having enjoyed various kinds of soups including bouillabaisse, gazpacho and gumbo, my favourite remains the Cantonese double-boiled soups.

Savoury soups are best sipped warm, if not hot. Living in the hot and humid equatorial climate has never discouraged me from insisting on a bowl of hot savoury soup during meals. And this is regardless of whether or not there is air-conditioning, much to the chagrin of my heat-intolerant wife. But few would disagree that hot soups are best drunk in cold, chilly temperatures. Or rather, in cold and chilly temperatures, one must uncompromisingly insist on having a bowl of warm soup. During the winter of my fellowship in US some years ago, one of my must-do pre-soup drinking

rituals was to prep myself for several minutes at the balcony, achieving near hypothermic temperatures dressed in only T-shirt and shorts. Just before freezing, I would dash in to my soup. Spoon by spoon, as the elixir trickles down the oesophagus, you start to have this fuzzy feeling of joy and gratitude, as the quivering body is gently caressed and reassured. The experience is simply beyond description, and goes way beyond mere pleasure of taste, as one's gut is "strangely warmed".

If there is one experience that makes soup-drinking more complete, it would be to brew that soup yourself. Concocting a soup always reminds me of mixing water-colours during art class; a bit of this, a bit of that, and surprise! I must confess that I am never a disciplined cook who follows recipes like a chemistry practical workbook. But over the years, I have come to realise that there are some "practice guidelines", passed down from generation to generation that can make a pivotal difference between good soups and great soups (bad soups are rare in my experience).

The first thing I learnt from my many informal teachers of soup-making

is that there is direct correlation between the ingredients used to anchor the broth and the subsequent index of gratification. The ingredients do not have to be spectacular; but they must be carefully and earnestly chosen. The second essential element is patience. The soup must go through the obligatory duration of boiling and simmering before one arrives at a reasonable end product. Industrial tactics such as turbo-engine powered cookers may give you a pot of liquid containing pulverised stuff, but it can hardly qualify as soup. One of the best soups I have tasted was in my good friend's house in Cheras near Kuala Lumpur. I later found out (through some kind of blind tasting) that the soup was painstakingly brewed over a charcoal stove by my friend's father (Cantonese, of course!) who spent hours managing the fire with a traditional straw fan! I remembered him telling me too that one must also have the right amount of trust to avoid frequent and premature opening of the lid to assess the progress of the soup, a profound tip which I only realised when I started brewing my own soups.

But if one were to think that protracted hours of boiling and simmering are a sure guarantee of quality, he would be as mistaken as my friend's neighbour (an Englishman) who excitedly declared to my friend that he had found the secret to all great Chinese cooking by frantically waving a bottle of Ajinomoto. Over-boiling can yield disappointing results, with excessive tissue-lysis, turning the soup murky both in looks and in taste. Impeccable timing is therefore critical. Appropriate timing also includes when to place the ingredients into the pot (preferably made of clay). For example, placing the ingredients into the water when it is boiling will prevent them from sinking to the bottom of the pot and getting stuck and burnt by the flames. Adding the ingredients when the stock is at boiling point will allow the currents of boiling water to hold the ingredients somewhat afloat.

One last tip to share is to resist the temptation of adding water to compensate for miscalculated quantity while the soup is simmering midway. I never understood why, but read recently that if the water added is too cold, it

actually causes the coagulation in the meat and protein-based ingredients in the soup. Consequently, the "good stuff" or essence is locked in, thereby reducing the flavour and depth of the soup. Somehow, it reminds me of how injecting unenthusiastic reinforcement to a project can ironically dilute the passion of others, leading to a poorer outcome. It is probably better to have less good soup than plenty of watered-down liquid.

When I showed this piece to a friend, he remarked that my few "practice guidelines" to responsible soup-making sound like some management tip – sincerity, patience, trust, timing and intensity. I am not sure if Scott Adams (of *Dilbert* fame) is also a regular cook with a subspecialty interest in soups. But perhaps this is why soup-drinking is such a profound and all-round experience that touches the mind, the palate and the heart. **SMA**



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