



By Helen Tierney Bale
California

Through Irish Eyes

Chicken soup – two words you're likely to hear as the cold and 'flu season hits. Chicken soup will be the remedy of choice for most cases of raspy throat, stuffy nose, watery eyes and assorted other ailments. It's the home-grown antibiotic around the world and has been for centuries. Browse the internet and you'll find countless references to the curative powers of this humble and relatively inexpensive delicacy.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, tells us, for instance, that chicken soup was prescribed as a cure for the common cold in Ancient Egypt. When Manilal, son of Mahatma Ghandi, contracted typhoid and pneumonia, a doctor recommended chicken soup and eggs. His parents were strict vegetarians and could not agree, but Manilal got the treatment anyway – and recovered. In *East of Eden* John Steinbeck wrote "And Tom brought him chicken soup until he wanted to kill him. The lore has not died out of the world, and you will still find people who believe that soup will cure any hurt or illness and is no bad thing for the funeral either."

In the 10th century Avicenna, the Persian physician, wrote of the curative powers of chicken soup. Two centuries later, Maimonides, the Jewish sage, wrote that chicken soup "has virtue in rectifying corrupted humours" and recommended it as nutrition for convalescents. He particularly recommended it for folks suffering from haemorrhoids and the early stages of leprosy. Seems a bit far afield from the aches and pains of cold and 'flu that generally suggest it as a remedy today. But then, who knows?

However, Dr. Stephen Rennard, professor of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Centre, suggests that there might be some scientific basis for the belief in the curative

powers of chicken soup – and who can argue with that?

Indisputable is the fact that it is simple to prepare, relatively cheap, and easily digested, making it a good food for winter convalescents. And sipping warm soup can also clear the sinuses because of the steam's effect on the nasal passages, serving as a natural decongestant which also relieves cold and 'flu symptoms. Finally, chicken soup can be beneficial as a comfort food, if you just think it's going to help.

There is no specific recipe for chicken soup, other than it starts with boiled chicken and adds vegetables, sometimes rice or pasta, especially egg noodles – whatever's on hand. One friend says "clean out the fridge." This could mean carrots, celery, squash, and even a bit of shredded cabbage.

There are probably as many "recipes" for chicken soup as there are housewives in Ireland making their own version of Irish stew. My mother believed firmly in chicken soup. We had a big old coal range in the kitchen for winter use – heating as well as cooking. As soon as North Jersey nights turned a little crisp in late August, it was





time to fire up the stove and start making chicken soup.

First of all, this meant a big pot of stock or broth, made by boiling the less palatable parts of the chicken in enough salted water to cover. This included the necks, wings and what my father called "the part that goes over the fence last".

The big pot simmered overnight on the back of the stove and next day the skin and bones were fished out and the stock moved into another big pot where the main parts of the chicken were added. When the meat literally fell free it was removed, the skin and bones discarded and vegetables added to the pot (never exactly the same each time). Meantime another pot of stock was started. Often both the chicken stock and chicken soup were preserved in quart jars, so that we never ran out, either for our own family or for ailing neighbours.

Everyone does it a little differently, all around the world. In Britain, for instance, chicken soup is clear and watery, with chunky vegetables such as corn and peas, chicken and salt.

In Belgium the "Gentse-waterzooi" is a stew with chicken, vegetables and cream, originally from Ghent. Immigrants brought this to

the United States and a stew-like form of chicken soup called Chicken Booyah is known in Wisconsin as "Belgian Penicillin."

Portugal and Brazil favour a form of chicken soup known as Canja, a broth prepared with rice, diced carrots and shredded chicken and seasoned with salt, onions, garlic, cumin and bay leaves. It is believed to help an individual overcome colds, digestive problems, and other mild forms of illness.

Many East Asian soups are based on chicken broth. Typical Chinese seasoning for chicken soup includes ginger, spring onions, black pepper, soy sauce, rice wine and sesame oil.

In Bogota, capital of Colombia, there is a version of chicken soup called ajiaco. It combines chicken, corn, potatoes, avocado, capers, an herb called guacas and is served with a dollop of sour cream.

Eastern Europeans have many versions. In Bulgaria chicken soup is often seasoned with vinegar or lemon juice. The Polish sometimes serve ground almonds in their rosol. This may have been the basis for a form of croutons popular in Israel known as soup almonds.

The French serve chicken-based forms of bouillon and consommé with seasonings of bay leaves, fresh thyme, dry white wine and garlic.

Homemade chicken soup in Germany typically consists of chicken broth to which kitchen herbs and durum wheat noodles are added. There is also a dish known as Huhnereintopf (chicken stew) which starts with chicken broth, pieces of chicken, boiled vegetables and kitchen herbs. Still another way of making chicken soup in Germany is to omit the vegetables and add homemade noodles to the broth, along with pickling spice, salt and pepper.

Greek chicken soup is made with lemon and eggs and served with





rice. This is called avogolemono (egg and lemon) and is a traditional remedy for colds and hangovers.

In Italy chicken soup often is served with pasta in dishes such as cappalletti in brood, tortellini in brood, and passatelli.

For Jewish people, chicken soup is traditional, often with matzah balls. In the shtetl (sic) people often were very poor, but chicken raising required little land or money. Every Jewish family tried to acquire at least one chicken in honour of the Shabbat meals, and would stretch it as far as possible. Every part of the chicken was used, with dishes such as p'tcha (chicken feet), pupika (roasted gizzards), chopped liver, stuffed hezel (neck), and greben (crackling made from fat and skin). Schmaltz (chicken fat) was kept and used for cooking.

After the meat was eaten, the carcasses were used to make chicken soup. Parts of the chicken, especially the breasts, which produce a more delicate flavour when boiled, were used to make soup and the meat was then used in dishes such as kreplach, knishes, and blintzes. The kreplach are traditionally added to the soup on the eve of Yom Kippur. Lokshen or flat egg noodles are also a favourite Jewish addition to chicken soup.

A traditional garnish, hard to obtain in shops today due to hygiene regulations banning the sale of internal organs, was unlaidd chicken eggs taken from the inner organs of the hen and boiled in the soup. Parsley and dill were used to flavour the Jewish chicken soup.

Samgyetang is a Korean chicken soup with ginseng, dried jujube fruits, garlic, ginger and glutinous rice. It is supposed to be not only a cure for physical ailments, but a preventer of illness as well. Baeksuk is popular among Koreans for its power to cure minor illnesses, such as a cold, but doesn't contain any noodles.

Mexicans are fond of Caldo de pollo, a common Latin American soup made with whole chicken pieces, half slices of potatoes and whole leaves of cabbage.

And then there's the United States and Canada, where chicken soup often has noodles in it, giving it the common name of chicken noodle soup. The term may have been coined in a commercial for Campbell's soup in the 1930s when a slip of the tongue on the Amos & Andy radio show changed "chicken soup with noodles", one of the company's original 21 varieties, into "chicken noodle soup". It was shorter, it was catchy, and so the company changed the name.

Only one listing was found for Ireland, a 30-minute variety using frozen chicken slices and plastic bags of vegetables and pasta. Ah, the pace of modern life!

But, homemade, instant or canned, chicken soup apparently really is good for what ails you – colds, flu, leprosy, haemorrhoids or hangovers. Enjoy!

Sláinte

