



**Soup salvation**  
Charlotte Wood is on a mission to rescue the reputation of soup.

# The solace of soup

In this extract from her new book, *Love and Hunger*, Charlotte Wood ponders soup's transformative powers.

**As a cook one has certain duties,** I sometimes feel. And one of mine is to rescue the reputation of soup.

For a short while I thought the title of this book might include the word "soup", which to me evokes the warmth and complexity and nourishment I wanted the book itself to symbolise. But it was wrong: as a title it sounded wan, sad, thin. It conjured invalidism, and produced the same kind of depressed, miserly feeling that causes my friend Vicki to set her jaw, fold her arms and declare that she hates soup.

I know what she means. There is something wrong with the way we Anglo Australians have experienced soup that took me years to recover from. Maybe it has something to do with the paucity, the

hollowness and the lack of cadence in the word itself. Soup. Slop. Slump. Contrast this with ribollito, or minestrone. Or harira, bisque, pho, bouillabaisse, tom yum, gazpacho.

But the word itself can't bear all the blame for soup's bad reputation. I think one of the biggest obstacles is a textural one; I thought I disliked soup for many years, and when I thought about it, the texture of badly made soups was to blame. My mother was not exactly a passionate cook, but a competent one who took the nutrition of her family seriously. Our diet consisted almost entirely of unprocessed food; we ate fresh (often home-grown) vegetables, mostly brown bread, very little salt, sturdy cuts of meat, fruit grown in local orchards and other nutrient-dense stuff. There was no takeaway food beyond a

very occasional parcel of hot chips from the fish and chip shop next to the Savoy Cinema (oh, the joy of this, and the triumph when it was you who got to nurse the scalding paper bundle on the car trip home, shifting frequently with the exquisite pain of your burning thighs).

But despite all this, there was one form of convenience food our mother wholeheartedly embraced: tins. Like "soup", the word "tin" seems to have something of the Great Depression about it to my ears (we never said "canned", which must have sounded far too American for my English parents), but tinned soup, tinned spaghetti, tinned baked beans and tinned peaches were my mother's saviours on the astonishingly rare days when cooking a two-course meal for seven people – this after the daily baking of some kind of cake or slice for afternoon tea – became too much effort.

She must have cooked real soups now and then, but I barely remember those: what we adored was tinned tomato soup, thickened with milk, eaten with fingers of hot buttered toast. If you mention "tomato soup" to my husband, on the other hand, he visibly blanches – along with his siblings, he remains scarred by the tinned tomato soup their father "made" every time their mother went to hospital to have a baby. Their dad's soup-to-milk ratio was rather out of whack, resulting in a tepid liquid of the palest pink. Ours, however, was a deep, rich (some might say unnaturally lurid) ochre colour. I can't remember really what was so delicious about it, except perhaps that it was so laden with salt that we found it irresistible. That, and the fact we were allowed to eat it in the living room while watching television, sitting picnic-style on a tablecloth on the floor.

It was a visit from my Auntie Pat that revealed to me exactly how luxurious soup could be. Pat is an excellent cook, who makes the kind of good British food made famous by people like Delia Smith. Proximity to Europe, I suspect, gave my aunt a flair for cooking that my mother, who moved to Australia at 19, always lacked. To this day Pat's food is simple, modest, yet always richly flavoured and beautifully textured. She stayed with me in Sydney during the dreadful early part of our mother's surgery and radiotherapy for a fatal brain tumour, a time now tinged with such horror I can remember it only as a blur of hospital visits, our mother's shaven head and her bouts of vomiting. When I think of how it must have been for Pat, crammed into a tiny flat not only with my partner

and me, but sharing a bedroom with two of my sisters for week upon week of terrified misery, I am ashamed of how little I thought of supporting her. But I was still in my selfish twenties; in that shocked and frightened time I simply slotted my aunt into our mother's role, expecting her to care for us rather than the other way around.

I had a job not far from home at the time, and when they were not at the hospital I would come home and meet Pat and my sisters for lunch. I remember the first day our aunt presented us with deep bowls of velvety vegetable soup, accompanied by hunks of crusty fresh bread. This soup was like nothing I had ever eaten. It tasted, looked, smelled and felt sumptuous in the mouth: earthy, as richly coloured as mahogany, spiced with complex

part of an environmental crusade (and it is – food rotting in landfill gives off methane, a greenhouse gas 25 times more potent than carbon pollution created by car exhaust, and each Australian throws about 136 kilos of food per year into the garbage), but what I really love is rescuing all the “bits and bobs” from their fate as compost. I love creating something rich and aesthetically pleasing from something seemingly so lacking, so poor: a lump of leek, a single sprouting potato, a drooping celery stick and a drying knob of ginger. And a soup recipe is such an adaptable creature; any vegetable you have to hand can be added, from half a capsicum to a wheel of eggplant to a can of lentils. The only essentials in my soups are onion and garlic – from there, the possibilities are endless.

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layers of heat and flavour, it warmed the chest and the spirit in some deep, nourishing way. It was exactly what we needed.

As I wiped my bowl clean with the bread, I asked Pat how she had made it. Where had the ingredients come from?

“Oh,” she said, “just bits and bobs,” gesturing in the direction of the lower part of the fridge. The *fridge*? I was appalled: the “crisper” – which as comedian Billy Crystal has pointed out should more accurately be referred to as the “rotter” – surely had held only a couple of limp carrots, half a dried-out onion and a yellowing celery stalk. *This* could not have come from *that*. But it had, with the addition of a little stock, and olive oil and garlic and tomatoes, and a judicious amount of whizzing in the food processor to create the velvety texture and meld the flavours so perfectly.

So that was my conversion to soup. As is so often the case when a disliked food is prepared by a good cook, the transformation seemed miraculous. Still, it took another decade or so until I became a fully fledged soup-maker myself. Working from home has had something to do with this – for convenience, very little beats simply ladling into a bowl some rich vegetable soup (into which has gone bacon and homemade chicken stock and lentils or chickpeas or beans and a parmesan rind), topped with a thread of walnut oil or a dollop of pesto. And I must be growing very old, because these days part of the motivating factor for making soup is the thrill of saving food from waste. Of course I like to think of it as

## Pharmacy in a bowl

Feed this to anyone who has a cold – they will feel better instantly.

Serves 8

- Olive oil
- 5 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 brown onion, finely chopped
- 2 small red chillies, finely chopped
- 1 stick celery, finely chopped
- 1 leek, finely chopped
- White cabbage, finely chopped
- 1 red capsicum, roughly chopped
- 3 carrots, roughly chopped
- 3 litres chicken or vegetable stock
- 1 head broccoli, roughly chopped
- 1 400gm can tomatoes
- 1 cup Puy lentils
- Salt and pepper
- Grated parmesan, to serve

1 Sauté the garlic, onion, chilli, celery, leek, cabbage, capsicum and carrots in batches in the oil until well browned.

2 Put the chicken stock in a big pot on the stove and bring to the boil, tossing in all the sautéed ingredients.

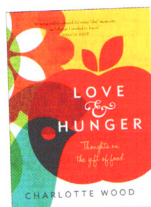
3 Add broccoli and tomatoes, and simmer until all vegetables are tender.

4 Reserving stock, remove vegetables with a slotted spoon and purée in a food processor or blender until smooth (or roughly blended, depending on how rustic you like your texture).

5 Return puréed vegetables to stock and add lentils. Simmer for 15-20 minutes or until lentils are tender (more if you want them falling apart). Season well with salt and pepper.

6 Serve with a sprinkle of parmesan.

Chilled soups are another wonder I have only recently discovered. A couple of summers ago, on the hottest day for 60 years, some friends and I flopped about a beach house trying desperately to cool ourselves by wandering in and out of the shower all day, then draping ourselves before an array of electric fans, all on full throttle. Oddly presciently – we'd had no idea the temperature would climb to *48 degrees Celsius* – very early that morning I had made a soup of lettuce, leeks, green peas and mint, and bunged it into the freezer. At nine o'clock that evening, when the temperature had dropped to a crisp 36 degrees and we sweltered on the deck in our swimming costumes and wet sarongs, we ate the icy green soup, each bowl topped with three chilled prawns and a dollop of yoghurt. It seemed a gift from the gods of cool.\*



*This is an edited extract from Love and Hunger: Thoughts on the Gift of Food by Charlotte Wood, published by Allen & Unwin, \$29.99, pbk.*

