

From OBSERVATIONS FROM OVER THE HILL: SOUP, BEAUTIFUL SOUP

In the household I shared with Ralph, whoever got the urge first would make a soup. The ingredients for our soups were the equivalent of other people's compost heaps. Mine, like Ralph's, contained leftovers, but only the freshest, with a dominant vegetable bought fresh, as the spirit moved me. Unlike his, they always had a theme. I made broccoli soups, carrot soups, lentil soups, mushroom and barley soups, but one was hard put to identify Ralph's. He used anything he found in the refrigerator. This is because he was unconcerned about quality and proportion; whatever there was, even if poised on the cusp of inedibility, got thrown in. What resulted was usually quite tasty, if considerably shorter-lived than mine, as his soups began to go bad within two days. They also tended to taste alike, which in principle is similar to mixing colors: if you put enough of them together, the result is one or another shade of brown, or, as in the case of Ralph's soups, green. I usually enlivened my soups with a garnish of sour cream and scallion tops, a practice that Ralph scoffed at. He accused me of using them as a crutch.

We would fight for refrigerator space. I was often forced to make my next soup before we finished eating one of his, because if I waited too long, he would already have embarked on his next, preempting all of the leftovers I was depending on using. We would tilt over a half-dozen wilted spears of asparagus, a teaspoon of lemon juice, a slightly aged green pepper. Ralph would puree everything into slop until I suggested that he release the blender's 'On' button sooner. After that, his soups at least had a variety of different textures, if not different tastes, depending on the nature of the ingredients. My soups looked better and were less dense. His looked like excrement, but being thicker, were more appealing in a blizzard. Mine, being less scattershot, may have lacked the globally nutritional variety of his, but his were more nourishing—until they went bad, that is—as they contained at least one item from each of the major food groups.

We constantly had stand-offs about who would make the soup for guests. He considered mine too narrowly conceived, and I considered his too unpredictable. This remained a major bone of contention between us and made for some pretty tense pre-dinner party discussions. However, I had a reluctant admiration for Ralph's creativity. Who else would have been visionary enough to throw in, along with the usual onions, potatoes, carrots, celery and cooked leftovers, a few aging potato chips, a random mixture of leftover cereals, a couple of soggy saltines, a handful of wizened grapes, the scrapings of nearly empty jars of apple sauce, chutney and horseradish, the last dollop of ketchup from an encrusted bottle of same, some miscellaneous olives, six stale macadamia nuts, a handful of moist corn chips and half a brown banana, and still come up with something edible?