

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO
POTTAGES, BROTHS AND SOUPS

THERE is no dish, perhaps, that comes to table, which gives such general satisfaction as well prepared soup; let the appetite be vigorous or refined, an excellent soup will invariably prove grateful to it; therefore, it should be the province of the cook constantly to be in a position to produce it at a short notice.

Frederick Bishop (1862), p. 68

A study of soup provides many permutations in the search for a definition. Everyone understands what a ‘soup’ is, but arriving at a simple description is not easy. It can range from a clear *consommé* or other light concoction to start a meal, to a thick mixture of meat and vegetables that is a meal in itself. Soup has an important part in the etiquette of dining, and in the evolution of the presentation and service of food to the table. Several writers who dipped into its mix of history and ingredients came up with the same recipes and opinions, which they published as their own work, but it never fails to produce a nourishing dish.

‘Soup’ is said to derive from the French *soupe* which describes both a sop (a piece of bread soaked in liquid) and then by extension the liquid itself. However, when French terms are used on a menu, it is *potage* that is the word chosen to translate the English ‘soup’. ‘Pottage’ was used in England from medieval times, and dishes with this name are similar to those later called soups. In its origin, this word refers to something cooked in a pot, which covers many forms of food.

A thick cereal based pottage can take the origins of soup back into prehistory, for an important element of primitive diet was a kind of porridge or frumenty enriched with a wide variety of herbs and seeds. The basic cereal was soaked in water, and as techniques

advanced it was boiled or cooked to burst the grain and thicken the liquid. Leaves of many plants were added, some now considered weeds, such as nettles, plantain and docks. Flax seeds (linseed) gave oil, and fat from meat could be included. An early grain used in Britain was barley, followed by oats and rye. Vegetables like beans and peas were introduced. The dish could evolve once earthenware provided cooking vessels, and the eventual creation of metal cauldrons meant a rapid boiling process could be achieved.

The Roman cookery book attributed to Apicius gives some recipes for pottages (*Pultes*) thickened either with hulled spelt, wheat flour or bread crumbs, with oil and spiced meat added. A cereal pottage in Anglo-Saxon times could be contrasted with the thinner liquid of broth.

Whereas recipe books now divide recipes into savoury and sweet, or meat, fish, vegetables and dairy food, the medieval recipes came under the headings of Pottages (eaten with a spoon), Leches (food that could be cut into slices and eaten with the fingers) and Baked meats (savoury or sweet items wrapped in pastry and baked in an oven). The method of eating using a spoon for the pottages, and a knife to cut slices of meat to be conveyed to the mouth by the fingers, with bread to soak up the juices, persisted in England well into the seventeenth century, and conditioned the presentation of food. Knife and fork sets became fashionable in the later part of that century, and recipes and menus from the early eighteenth century began to reflect the changes. It may be no coincidence that the term 'soup' began to be used in England at the same time.

Some form of soup under the guise of pottage or a boiled meat in broth had always taken its place at the beginning of a meal, as can be seen from the formal menus presented in medieval recipe manuscripts. The first course began with Boars Head, or Frumenty with venison (frumenty being a wheat-based pottage), and the second item was in most cases a pottage such as Bruet of almyne, Bruet of Almondes or potage de Blandesore. There are also recipes for sops, bread soaked in a liquid, but these dishes do not figure in the recorded menus of formal meals. They were more an occasional snack, something that could be eaten first thing in the morning, or

taken quickly after work or a journey before the main meal was ready.

The same ordering of the courses of a meal was still proposed when printed cookery books became available in the later sixteenth century, intended for smaller scale domestic use. *A Proper newe Booke of Cokerie* (c. 1557–8) gave the order of items to be served at meals, with a pottage or stewed broth starting the first course of dinner and a pottage or sewe in the same place at supper. A suggested menu for dinner began with Brawn and mustard followed by Capons stewed or served in a white broth. On fish days, a salad with hard boiled eggs was paired with a pottage of eels and lampreys. The same pattern was followed by *A Booke of Cookry* (1584). In the early seventeenth century, John Murrell started the first course of a Feast for Summer with a Grand Salad and a boiled capon, and a Winter Feast with a Collar of Brawn, a salad and a boiled capon. A 'small common Service' began with a boiled capon or chicken, whilst on fish days a dish of butter accompanied Rice milk. Robert May, although publishing *The Accomplisht Cook* in 1660, was a product of the culinary practice of the early 1600s, and his grander menus started with brawn, followed by capon in stewed broth, or stewed broth of mutton. More ordinary menus started with a Scotch Pottage or Skink, Pottage of Capon, Barley pottage or Rice pottage. Some of these dishes appeared under the name of soup in the eighteenth century recipe books.

The word 'soup' as we understand it began to emerge in the mid-seventeenth century. Robert May did provide three recipes for 'Soop' but they are not soups in the usual sense (May, p. 426). They begin a section on buttered vegetables, which are first boiled and then 'stewed' with butter, white wine and spices, and served on sippets of bread. In May's recipes, and those of his contemporaries, 'stew' is used as a verb and the word had not yet become a noun to define the end result of gently cooking meat and vegetables in a broth or gravy. His 'soop' recipes are part of Section XX, 'Potages for Fish-Days', which includes Barley Pottage, Gruel Pottage, Frumenty, Milk Pottage (oatmeal in milk), Pease Pottage, Onion Pottage, caudles and posssets, so they are yet further examples of the

wide range of dishes best eaten with a spoon. Earlier in his book, Section I dealt with 'all manner of Boyled Meats' using meat, subdivided into Olios and other boiled meats, Puddings and sausages, Hashes, Pottages and Capilotado's.

This shows that Soup, as it was to emerge, had a varied ancestry. There are many examples from the seventeenth century and beyond of meat and poultry cooked in a broth and served with it. *The Compleat Cook* (1655/1671) in the recipe for A Spanish Olio, suggests how the broth was taken separately. This complicated dish included bacon, beef, pigs trotters, mutton, a hen, pigeons, herbs, pepper and cloves, dried peas and chestnuts simmered in sufficient water 'so the Broth may grow afterwards to be neither too much nor too little, nor too gross, not too thin'. In serving, the meat was given a sauce of sugar and mustard, and the cook advised 'To do well, the Broth is rather to be drunk out of a Porringer, than to be eaten with a spoon, though you add some small slices of bread to it, you will like it the worse' (pp. 92-3).

Sir Kenelm Digby's collection of recipes, published in 1669 after his death, included a section on pottages and broths. There are several examples of *Potage de Santé*, good for invalids, which give instant nourishment. Included with these is 'Tea with Eggs', one of the earliest recipes to use the new ingredient: a pint of tea was poured onto two egg yolks beaten with sugar, and the result drunk whilst hot. Here pottage turns in the direction of posset. In Digby's recipes, broth was the basic ingredient of a pottage, thickened sometimes with oatmeal or barley, but mainly with bread to which the hot liquid was gradually added until a jelly-like consistency was reached:

half an hour before dinner take light bread well dryed from all moisture before the fire; then cut in slices, laid in a dish over coals, pour upon it a ladleful of broth, no more then the bread can presently drink up; which when it hath done, pour on another ladleful, and stew that, till it be drunk up; repeat this three or four times, a good quarter of an hour in all, till the bread is swelled like a gelly (if it be too long, it will grow

glewy and stick to the dish) and strong of broth; then fill it up near full with the same strong broth, which having stewed a while, put on the broth and herbs, and your Capon or other meat upon that, and so let it stew a quarter of an hour longer, then turn it up.

Kenelm Digby (1669), pp. 99–100

Here the thickened broth was served with the meat. Digby also used eggs as a nourishing thickener. The broth for these *santé* pottages would have been simmered sufficiently for it to jelly when cold. Pottage recipes are followed by Digby with some for wheaten flummery, oatmeal and barley pap and water gruel. The gruel was made with fine oatmeal and the part served to the aristocratic recipients named in the recipes was the thin 'cream' at the top of the pot. Digby advised that the remaining gross oatmeal would make a gruel for the servants. It was always considered that food such as porridge was for manual labourers, whose hard work needed a heavier diet. Many of Digby's delicate pottages were to be taken first thing in the morning, giving a nourishing light meal to those of a valetudinary disposition.

Samuel Pepys provides a good day-to-day account of the consumption of food, both at home and in ordinaries or other public eating places. He noted having 'a mess of good broth' on 16 September 1665. The only other reference to broth comes the following year, when he suffered from indigestion after consuming too much beer followed by some milk on 15 July 1666. The next day 'I had some broth made me to drink, which I love.' He used a different term on 12 May 1667, having decided to go with his wife to a French eating house run by his periwig-maker Monsieur Robin in Covent Garden. There they had 'a mess of potage' first, followed consecutively by a couple of pigeons and some *boeuf-a-la-mode*. Pepys went for the first time to the Cock at the end of Suffolk Street on 15 March 1669 and 'dined very handsome, with a good Soup and a pullet'. He must have praised this meal to his wife, for she developed a desire to eat that establishment's pea soup, so they and three friends went to the Cock on 12 April 'and dined very well'. These few examples that give a changing use of broth, pottage and soup

over four years are insufficient to chronicle a trend: they may be coincidental to what Pepys decided to record, and relate to his need for invalid food, eating at a French ordinary, and at a new venue, for him, where the word 'soup' was in vogue. As these are the only references in the Diary it is impossible to arrive at a firm conclusion, but they may indicate the arrival in general English use of the word 'soup' for the liquid dish at the beginning of a meal. Although 'soup' is said to have come from the French word for bread sops, when Pepys dined at the French eating house he had a *potage* which remains as the term on supercilious menus to this day.

If Pepys's wife wanted to make a pea soup at home, she would have had to look under broths and pottages in the recipe books of her time. 'Soup' may have been used in personal manuscript collections before it was used in printed books. Whilst John Evelyn used the terms of pottage and broth in his manuscript collection (begun *c.* 1649), and Rebecca Price recorded 'all sorts of pottages Broaths and firmity' in her recipe book (*c.* 1681), Ann Blencowe in 1694 included 'peas soope' and a 'Gravysoop from Serjeants Inn Cook'.

The professional cooks who served Charles II and his successors, and their courtiers, were no doubt at the forefront of culinary fashion, but it took some time before their recipe collections were published. William Salmon (1644–1713) in *The family dictionary or household companion* (1696) included recipes for Broths and Pottages, but none for Cullises, Bisques or Soups. The enlarged fourth edition of 1710 added a Bisque of Fish, and recipes for Soop Brown, Soop Good, Soop White, Soop or Pease-Porridge and Soop (pp. 467–8). The period between the two publications perhaps shows when 'Soup' became an acknowledged term.

T. Hall, a free Cook of London, had recipes for broth in *The Queen's Royal Cookery* of 1709, but again no soup. However, a publication of the following year, *England's Newest Way in all sorts of Cookery Pastry and All Pickles that are fit to be Used* gave recipes for Pease-soop, White Soop and Brown Soop amongst those for broths and pottages. The author, Henry Howard, another free Cook of London, and late cook to the Duke of Ormonde and the Earls of Salisbury and Winchelsea, also laid out a number of menus for each

month of the year. These have four or five items in each of the two courses, and about a quarter of the menus start with soup or a pottage. Patrick Lamb had been master-cook to Charles II, James II, William and Mary and Queen Anne. He gave recipes for broths, cullises, gravies, ragoos and 'Soops', but no pottages in his book *Royal-Cookery; or, The Compleat Court Cook* first published in 1710; a second edition with additions followed in 1716.

By this time it would appear that society in general had taken up the use of the term 'soup'. Mary Kettlby compiled *A Collection of above Three Hundred Receipts in Cookery, Physick and Surgery* from the several hands of 'a Number of very Curious and Delicate Housewives' (1714). At the beginning of the book, just as they would appear at a meal, are six soup recipes, three of them for 'Pease-Soup'. N. Bailey, who produced *Dictionarium Domesticum, Being a New and Compleat Household Dictionary* in 1736, had no entry for Broth or Pottage, but several recipes for Cullises, and five Soups.

The printed books provide menus of notable feasts, and suggestions for ordering more modest meals at home. Personal manuscripts, some of which have now been published, are invaluable in showing the arrangement of small dinners for family and friends. Lady Grisell Baillie's Christmas dinner in 1715 began with a traditional plumb pottage with sago, and included a separate 'plumb puden', whilst a meal for Lord Offord on 28 December was headed simply 'Sup'. In August 1718 she had an intriguing 'Soup without anything in it', and at home in 1719 with Lady Mary Wortley they had 'A soup with Marrabon'. On a few occasions no soup was served, on others there were two, the traditional brown soup and white soup, as at the dinner at the Duke of Chandos's house at Cannons on 12 April 1725. When the table layout is indicated, soup is usually placed at the top of the table, which would facilitate the exchange for the remove or 'relief' dish as Lady Baillie called the secondary meat or fish dish. On one occasion, 22 June 1722, there was no remove, and the soup with peas was placed in the middle of the table (Scott-Moncrieff, pp. 281–304).

From this time on, soups were a regular item in cookery books, and the instructions given provide information on how food was

served at table, and on the etiquette of dining. The eighteenth-century habit, still influenced by earlier custom, had several dishes served simultaneously on the table for each course, including soup and fish. These were served first, then the serving bowls were removed so two other items could be put in their place. Numerous diagrams of the table lay-out for this kind of service can be found. In the late nineteenth century, service *à la Française* was replaced by service *à la Russe* with dishes served consecutively, but soup retained its place as the starting dish. A light concoction was preferred to start a formal meal, but a thick mixture of several ingredients simmered in the pot would have been for many people a meal in itself.

'Soup' was not a new concept at the end of the seventeenth century, but rather a new name for an age-old dish that could take many forms, and its development can be traced by studying the broths and pottages that preceded soup recipes.