



# Culinary Craftwork

## Newsletter: February 2011

### *Savory Soups for Winter*

#### *Heartwarming Memories*

#### **Introduction**

This issue of the newsletter features a review of Royal Taj restaurant and a few of my favorite soup recipes: **Chicken-Tortilla Soup (Page 5)**; **Lentil Soup (Page 7)**; **New England Clam Chowder (Page 9)**; and **Split Pea Soup (Page 11)**.

Culinary Craftwork is my business, which specializes in offering private and group cooking classes, as well as personal chef services and small-scale catering. Some of you may remember me from when I taught cooking classes at Williams-Sonoma in Los Gatos. I am grateful to all of you who encouraged me to branch out on my own!

The Culinary Craftwork experience is different in that the classes I offer are fully customizable to what you want. I teach the classes in your own home at a time that is convenient for you. And I do all the shopping.

*It is my mission to give you the tools you need to prepare meals that will seduce you with savor and wow your guests.*

My website contains many sample menus that focus on building different skills, but I am happy to partner with you and come up with something new. The classes are fun, informal, and informative — and you get to eat!

The Culinary Craftwork newsletter is a bi-monthly publication that focuses on seasonal fare with recipes and pictures. My newsletter also includes a section called "Ask the Chef," so please don't be shy—email me with your questions.

I invite you to view my previous [newsletters](#) and [recipes](#).



#### **Professional In-home Cooking Classes**

Culinary Craftwork offers professionally taught in-home cooking classes by a chef with over 20 years' experience in restaurants and catering.

The classes are designed to build basic skills and boost confidence in the kitchen. I teach the classes in your own home, offer themed menus, cooking class parties and catered dinner parties.

Full class descriptions and prices are available on my website.

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## Steve Lyle's Apple Tart



Steve Lyle was the first chef I went to work for in New York City, and his signature apple tarts were one of my responsibilities during service.

This tart is one of the desserts I teach my clients to make. It is a very simple recipe that requires a bit of skill to master, but the result is delightfully light and just barely sweet.

The tart consists of thinly sliced Granny Smith apples on a crust of buttery *pâte brisée* glazed with apricot preserves. It should be served warm with lightly whipped cream.



So, it's winter in Silicon Valley. A few days ago we were wearing shorts and tee shirts and dining al fresco in the sun. After several weeks of clouds and rain the weather had turned warm and clear. The poor trees are confused—ornamental pear trees and acacias are already blooming (this typically does not happen until late in February). Either we're in for an early spring or a big shock. All this talk about climate change does not help either.

As I write this, the rain is back, but I'm spending the day at home working on various projects—feeling good because I conducted a particularly successful cooking class last night, and the clients were really involved, asking lots of questions, which I love. They were especially interested in my experiences working in restaurant kitchens, so I got to reminisce, which is always nice. I spent the better part of 20 years working in restaurants and catering, but that ended in 2001, so I've had plenty of time to contemplate the past.

My client had read Anthony Bourdain's memoir, "Kitchen Confidential," and was wondering how much of what he wrote was hyperbole. I don't know Bourdain personally apart from his writing and his television shows, but my instinct and experience tell me that very little of his narrative was overstated. The fact is there is a lot of drama behind the scenes even in the best restaurants. It is an intense environment, and it is not at all unusual for tempers and passions to assert themselves at the most inappropriate of times.

Of all the restaurants I worked at, I remember the first one most clearly: Quatorze on West 14<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, under Chef Stephen Lyle in 1985. I even remember the names of the guys on the day shift as well as those on the night crew. I worked the pantry station (hot and cold appetizers and desserts) at night along with Orlando. We'd get there at about 3:00 in the afternoon, and Primo would be prepping Steve's signature apple tarts that were served freshly baked with lightly whipped cream, while Louis Deluca, the day chef, would be whipping up something for the "staff meal" that was always delicious. He was also responsible for preparing the soup of the day.

Louis is an extremely talented chef and a longstanding friend of mine. His soups are sublime. I still remember a soup made from the broth of steamed mussels with tomatoes, fennel and pernod. I haven't tasted it in many years, but it is indelibly etched in what remains of my long-term memory banks. And so, because it is winter, and because I am in the mood to reminisce about comfort foods, my thoughts settle on soups—heartwarming, soul-satisfying soups. The four recipes that I include in this newsletter reflect my current state of mind.

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## Snap Review: Royal Taj Indian Restaurant in Campbell

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When we moved to Campbell in 2001, one of the first things I did was to scope out our nearest Indian restaurant, which turned out to be Royal Taj. While there are plenty of Indian restaurants in the South Bay to choose from, it was important to me that we have one within easy driving distance to grab a quick meal because I am addicted to Indian spices. Finding Royal Taj was a happy turn of events. Not only is the restaurant conveniently located in Campbell, but they turn out some pretty good food for the most part. They also have a bargain-priced daily lunch buffet for \$7.95.

Starting with the good—among appetizers I recommend the vegetable pakoras, which are assorted vegetable fritters dipped in a chickpea flour batter with ground coriander seed. The pakoras are served with a fresh tasting spicy mint dip and a lightly sweetened tamarind dip. Many Indian restaurants serve these dips with fried appetizers, but their dips are often tired, over-sweetened or bland, and the fritters greasy; not so at Royal Taj. I also like their mulligatawny soup with chicken in a creamy lentil base.

Among the entrees are an assortment of curries (hit and miss, unfortunately) and excellent tandoori grilled meats and chicken. The portions are generous, so we enjoy sharing. My husband's favorite dish is "chicken makhawala," elsewhere known as "makhani chicken" or "butter chicken." It is boneless tandoori spiced chicken in a rich tomato cream sauce—not low calorie, but definitely yummy. If you're looking for a lighter dish, I highly recommend the boneless tandoori roasted chicken tikka, which gets plenty of flavor from its marinade but has no sauce per se.

While we enjoy dining at the Royal Taj, I do have a couple of complaints: the restaurant is consistent in its inconsistency. Sometimes certain items are fresher and more lively tasting than others—and that goes for the service as well. The host is without exception somber faced and unwelcoming. He also assists with waiting on tables, and it is rare to get any kind of acknowledgement from him when placing an order. Evidently, he has better things to do with his life than deal with customers... Fortunately, the other waiters are pleasant, if occasionally forgetful.

I should also say a word about the homemade breads, which are excellent and made to order. I've tried making tandoori naan (a barely leavened flatbread baked in the clay oven) at home, but the results have been disappointing. There is little the home cook can do to replicate the baking environment of a clay oven. As for dessert, in general, I find most Indian desserts overly sweet, but Royal Taj's milky rice pudding with a hint of cardamom is a winner. All in all, I give the restaurant three stars.



[See what others have to say about Royal Taj on Yelp.](#)

## Royal Taj Indian Restaurant



### Royal Taj

1350 Camden Avenue  
Campbell, CA 95008

(408) 559-6801

[www.royaltajus.com](http://www.royaltajus.com)



[Click here for directions.](#)

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## Tortilla Strips



For this recipe you can use freshly sliced and fried corn tortillas or pre-packaged strips.

I think the all-natural tri-color strips from Fresh Gourmet are particularly festive looking—and they have good corn flavor.

You can find Fresh Gourmet's tortilla strips in most supermarkets (including Lucky's and Safeway), but they might be located in the produce department along with pre-packaged salad kits, croutons and other toppings.

## Chicken-Tortilla Soup



I've had tortilla soup in many different Mexican restaurants. Despite its prevalence on restaurant menus, I don't know how authentic the dish is. I suspect that it bears little resemblance to what Mexicans eat in Mexico, but it is delicious nonetheless.

This recipe for chicken-tortilla soup is easy to make—it can be prepared (start to finish) in about 40 to 45 minutes—and it is equally good at any time of year. In fact, it has become my husband's new favorite recipe. (Like me, he has many favorite recipes.)

For this recipe, canned tomatoes work better than fresh, as they have a more concentrated flavor. Hominy, also known as posole (dried corn kernels treated with lime), gives the soup a rich, corny flavor, so it is worth seeking out in the ethnic foods aisle of your local supermarket. (It comes canned in water.) You can freeze the remaining hominy for future use.

The soup can be eaten immediately or refrigerated. Like many soups and stews, however, the flavor improves with keeping. The garnishes of avocado, cheese and sour cream can be omitted for those on a low-fat diet with little loss of flavor, but don't omit the tortilla strips!



## Chicken-Tortilla Soup

Makes approximately 6 servings

### Ingredients

- 1 onion, chopped
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- 3 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 tsp. dried oregano, crushed
- 1 tsp. paprika
- ½-1 tsp. cayenne
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 (28-oz.) can plum tomatoes, crushed
- 48 oz. chicken broth
- 1 (4 oz.) can chopped green chiles
- 1 cup fresh or frozen corn kernels
- 1 cup canned white hominy, drained
- ¼ cup chopped cilantro
- 2 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- Fried tortilla strips
- Sargento Artisan Authentic Mexican cheese mix
- Sour cream (optional)
- Sliced avocado (optional)
- Lime wedges (optional)

### Directions

1. Heat a soup pot over medium heat. Add the olive oil and the onion. Cover and sauté gently, stirring occasionally, until soft and golden; add the garlic and stir till fragrant.
2. Add the paprika, cayenne, cumin, bay leaves and oregano. Stir in the tomatoes, green chiles and chicken broth. Bring to a boil, then turn down and simmer for 10-15 minutes. Season to taste with salt.
3. Stir in the corn, hominy, cilantro and whole chicken breasts. Poach the chicken gently in the soup for 10-15 minutes until just done. Remove the chicken breasts and slice them into bite-sized pieces. Return the chicken to the soup.
4. Assemble the chicken, fried tortilla strips, and shredded cheese mix in the bottom of individual soup bowls. Ladle the hot soup over and garnish with sliced avocado, lime wedges and sour cream if desired.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

## Sargento Mexican Cheese Mix



I considered a number of different cheeses for this recipe including Monterey jack, cheddar, queso cotija, among others.

Then I found Sargento's Mexican cheese blend (containing queso quesadilla, asadero, queso gallego, manchego & anejo enchilada). It works perfectly both flavor-wise and texture-wise in the soup.

Sargento Artisan Blends shredded Authentic Mexican Cheese can be found in most grocery stores, including Lucky's and Safeway.

## Lentils



Lentils come in a variety of shapes, colors and sizes. The common brown lentil is best for this soup recipe.

Small black and green lentils make wonderful salads, as they are firmer textured and hold their shape better.

Lentils contain 26% protein, which makes them the vegetable with the second highest protein count next to soy beans.

Lentils lend themselves to a variety of preparations as they cook comparatively quickly and absorb other flavors easily.

## Lentil Soup



Lentil soup is one of those great dishes that can be enjoyed year 'round. I am embarrassed to admit that I grew up on Progresso canned lentil soup, but after making my own from scratch—a very easy process—I will never go back to the can.

Usually, I make a simple version of the recipe, but it can easily be gussied up with the addition of some diced chorizo sausage (see sidebar on next page) and spinach. It is also a nice touch to sprinkle some grated parmesan cheese over the soup in the bowl.

The following recipe is perfect for the damp, chilly days of winter (or anytime).

## Lentil Soup

Makes 6–8 servings

### Ingredients

- 3 slices of bacon, finely diced
- 2 chorizo sausages, diced (optional)
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- ½ cup celery stalks, finely chopped
- ½ cup carrots, finely chopped
- 1 cup onions, finely diced
- 3 garlic cloves, finely chopped or crushed
- 1 lb. lentils, picked and rinsed
- 1 cup canned, crushed/chopped tomatoes
- 1 tsp. fresh thyme, chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tsp. ground coriander
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- 2 quarts chicken broth
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 Tbs. chopped Italian parsley
- 6 oz. baby spinach leaves (optional)

### Directions

1. Heat a soup pot over medium heat. Add the olive oil and the bacon. Sauté gently until the fat renders out of the bacon. Add the diced chorizo now, if using.
2. Add the celery, carrots and onions and cook until the onions are softened and translucent. Add the herbs and spices. Stir till fragrant, then add the tomatoes, lentils and chicken broth. Bring to a boil, then turn down and simmer for 35-40 minutes till the lentils are tender.
3. Season the soup to taste with salt and pepper. Using a potato masher, mash the lentils coarsely to desired consistency. Stir in chopped parsley and spinach leaves if using.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

## Chorizo Sausage



Chorizo is a pork sausage flavored with garlic, peppers and smoked pimentón, a type of paprika.

There are several types of chorizo: Mexican chorizo, Spanish chorizo, fresh chorizo and dried chorizo, so it can be a little confusing to know which one to choose.

Most common is the smoked, dried type, which is perfect for dicing and adding flavor to soups and stews.

## About Clam Chowders



### Manhattan Clam Chowder:

Manhattan clam chowder has clear broth, plus tomato for red color and flavor. In the 1890s, this chowder was called "New York clam chowder" or "Fulton Fish Market clam chowder."

The addition of tomatoes in place of milk was initially the work of Portuguese immigrants in Rhode Island, as tomato-based stews were already a traditional part of Portuguese cuisine.

Scornful New Englanders called this modified version of clam chowder "Manhattan-style" because, in their view, calling someone a New Yorker was an insult.



### New England Clam Chowder:

New England clam chowder is a milk- or cream-based chowder, traditionally made with potatoes, onion, salt pork or bacon, flour or hardtack/crackers, and clams.

Adding tomatoes to clam chowder was shunned, to the point that a 1939 bill making tomatoes in clam chowder illegal was introduced in Maine—an interesting bit of anecdotal history.

## New England Clam Chowder



Here on the West Coast clam chowder is typically a thick, creamy soup—basically a New England style chowder. Most New Englanders, however, do not make their chowder as thick as you will find it in many restaurants. The chowder is traditionally thickened with flour or ground up crackers. The addition of diced potatoes also helps act as a thickener.

New England clam chowder is a fairly easy soup to make, but there are a couple of things to keep in mind: Be careful not to boil the soup at any point, or you will risk curdling the milk and/or toughening the clams. A gentle simmer is all that's required.

For the best flavor the chowder really should be made with fresh clams, not canned clams. Shucking the clams can be a bit of work, but you can get around that by steaming the clams in a small amount of water or white wine just until they open. Be sure to strain the broth through a coffee filter or wet paper towel to remove any sand. Then chop the clams and proceed with the recipe, adding in the strained broth.

Some people prefer the flavor of bacon to salt pork. You can substitute bacon if you like; it will give the soup a distinct smoky/bacony flavor however.



## New England Clam Chowder

Makes 8–10 servings

### Ingredients

- 2 oz. fatty salt pork or bacon
- 4 Tbs. unsalted butter
- 1-2 celery stalks, finely diced
- 1 ½ cups onions, finely diced
- 2 Tbs. flour
- 2 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
- 2 cups of half and half
- 2 cups shucked and chopped clams with their juice
- ½ tsp. fresh thyme, chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 cup heavy cream
- A heavy dash of Tabasco
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 Tbs. chopped Italian parsley

### Directions

1. Cut the pork into fine dice and cook over medium heat in a large pot till brown and crackly. Remove the pork cracklings and melt the butter in the pan.
2. Add the celery and onions and cook until softened and translucent. Sprinkle on the flour and cook for several minutes without browning. Stir constantly.
3. Stir in the potatoes, add the half and half, thyme, and bay leaf, and simmer until the potatoes are tender.
4. Add the chopped clams and their liquid. Simmer for a few minutes; then add the cream and seasonings. Serve with chopped parsley and oyster crackers.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

## About Oyster Crackers



The traditional oyster cracker is hexagonal in shape and slightly puffy.

Typically, the crackers are very crisp and crunchy; some versions have small holes which make them look like tiny quilted pillows.

Oyster crackers are also usually dusted with salt. They contain no oysters or oyster extract, but are designed to accompany oysters and soups.

**Add smoked ham hocks and/or beef marrow bones for robust flavor.**



**Smoked Ham Hocks**



**Beef Marrow Bones**

## Split Pea Soup



My love of split pea soup goes back to childhood. It does not matter to me whether the soup is served chunky style, as in this recipe, or pureed completely. I remember enjoying pea soup in Venice when I was eight years old at a sidewalk café on the Lido beach. Pea soup is often cooked with ham or ham hocks for flavor.

Personally, I like to use beef marrow bones for a subtle richness without adding smokiness. Sometimes I'll use both a ham hock and a marrow bone. You can cook the ham hock in chicken broth until tender and then use the ham stock to make the soup. That way you can dice up the meat from the ham hock and use it in the soup.

There are many delicious variations possible when making split pea soup. For example, you can add a tablespoon or two of curry powder to the sautéed vegetables, or you can add cream and fresh mint to the pureed soup. The possibilities are virtually endless. I also like to garnish the soup with a drizzle of white truffle oil on top. The late, great chef, Leslie Revsin introduced me to the use of white truffle oil in conjunction with vegetable and pea soups.

## Split Pea Soup

Makes 6–8 servings

### Ingredients

- 3-4 slices of bacon, finely diced
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 cup celery stalks, finely diced
- ½ cup carrots, finely diced
- 1 cup onions, finely diced
- 1 medium leek, finely diced
- 3 garlic cloves, finely chopped or crushed
- 1 lb. dried split peas, picked and rinsed
- 1 tsp. fresh thyme, chopped
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 beef marrow bone or 1 ham hock
- 48 oz. chicken broth
- 2 cups water
- 1 tsp. salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 2-3 Tbs. chopped Italian parsley

### Directions

1. Heat a soup pot over medium heat. Add the olive oil, marrow bone, and the bacon. Sauté gently until the fat renders out of the bacon and the bones have colored.
2. Add the celery, carrots, leek and onions . Cook until the onions are softened and translucent. Add the garlic, herbs, salt & pepper. Stir till fragrant, then add the split peas, chicken broth and water. Bring to a boil, then turn down and simmer for 45 minutes, or until the split peas are tender.
3. Re-season the soup to taste with salt and pepper. Using a potato masher, mash the split peas to desired consistency or puree half the soup in a blender. Stir in the chopped parsley.

[Printer-Friendly Version of this Recipe](#)

## Use Chicken Broth for Flavor



Swanson makes a range of chicken broth products, but their “Natural Goodness” line is the superior choice for soups, as it is 100% fat free and contains no MSG (some of their other products do contain MSG).

The recipes in this issue of the newsletter could be made using water (for vegetarians), but are significantly more flavorful when made with chicken broth.

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## Ask the Chef



I love hearing from people who have read the newsletter or taken one of my classes.

I enjoy the opportunity to answer your questions in this general forum, and I hope that my advice is helpful.

Please continue to send me your questions, comments and ideas. They really make my day.

And don't forget—you can post your questions on the Culinary Craftwork Facebook fan page..

Thank you!

**Alyssa**

## Ask the Chef (Q&A)

### Preventing Mold from Forming on Cheese

*Glenna asks, "How can I prevent cheese from getting moldy in the refrigerator?"*

Reply: To prevent mold from forming on cheese, try wrapping it in a clean cotton cloth dampened with salt water before refrigerating. This will also help keep the cheese from drying out.

### Getting More Juice from Lemons and Limes

*Daniel asks, "When making cocktails at home I always squeeze fresh juice, but sometimes the lemons/limes are very hard and dry. Do you have any suggestions?"*

Reply: There are a couple of things you can do to get more juice. Let the fruit soak in warm water for 10-15 minutes before using, or microwave the fruit for 30 seconds on high. Then, using the heel of your hand, with moderate pressure, roll the lemons/limes on the counter, cut them in half and juice them.

### Softening Brown Sugar

*Tara asks, "What's the best way to soften brown sugar that has dried and hardened?"*

Reply: One method that will keep your brown sugar from hardening in the first place is to put a slice of bread or a couple of apple slices inside the container of sugar and seal tightly. If the sugar is already hard, you can soften it by freezing it completely and then thawing it. I have occasionally found the microwave helpful in softening brown sugar, but be sure to use a low setting or the sugar may melt or even boil.

### Separating Eggs/Removing Yolk Contamination

*Justine asks, "When I'm separating eggs, occasionally a bit of the egg yolk gets in the egg whites. Do you have any tips on how to remove it easily?"*

Reply: If you get a little egg yolk in your egg white, the whites will not whip properly. To remove the bits of yolk, dampen a small piece of cloth in cold water, then touch the cloth to the bits of yolk. The cloth will act like a magnet.

Click here to view previous [newsletters](#) and [recipes](#).