

"Nothing Special" Chowders

by Lydia Lovell

from Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

In a world where almost everyone possesses a smattering of talent, Aunt Olivia's skills might seem mundane, but that's not how her friends and family viewed her gifts for cookery. True, she never achieved world-renown as she might have had she painted pictures as well as she made pies, or composed melodies that harmonized as perfectly as the flavors she blended, or wrote literature as easily as she put together a chowder. Nevertheless, those who sampled her cooking liked it, and those fortunate enough to eat frequently at her table could attest that her expertise approximated art.

Sharing a recipe is one way to allow another cook to repeat an especially successful gustatory experience but, as many of us have learned to our chagrin, often there's more to achieving satisfactory results than simply stirring measured ingredients together according to directions and cooking for a specified length of time at a particular temperature. Sometimes, in fact, cooking is so creative that two different cooks using the same recipe produce two quite dissimilar dishes. And when an imaginative cook prepares a stew or chowder or soup or goulash, she may turn out a once-in-a-lifetime achievement. It may someday be equalled, but never repeated.

Whenever Aunt Olivia announced she planned to make chowder, we all chorused, "What kind?" Her reply told us we could either expect a traditional one... corn, clam, or haddock... or that we'd be tasting something unique at suppertime.

If Aunt Olivia smiled guilelessly and said, "It's just a chowder, no special kind," we knew we'd have a new experience and chances were good we'd enjoy it. How did she set out to make a **Nothing Special Chowder**? By saving leftovers, that's how. And that's the reason no two were ever just alike. The supply of leftovers was never the same, either. Let's see what Aunt Olivia might use in a chowder.

Suppose within the past week her menus had included the following: chicken pie, corn-on-the-cob, boiled beet greens, potato salad, hamburgers, carrots, peas, string beans, tossed salads, and a baked fish. Would small quantities of those inspire you to start a chowder brewing? If you were Aunt Olivia, your answer would be an enthusiastic affirmative.

She would have refrigerated any leftover chicken pie. Uneaten corn-on-the-cob would have been similarly stored. Cooking water from beet greens, potatoes, and all the other vegetables would have been poured together in a glass jar and kept on ice. Unused chopped onions were never thrown away following hot dog and hamburger cookouts, nor were chopped vegetables remaining in the bottom of her wooden salad bowl. Not even the jellied juices in the baking pan in which the fish was cooked were discarded. Fish juices went into the jar with the cooking waters from vegetables.

On chowder-making day, Aunt Olivia melted a tablespoon or two of fat in a heavy skillet. To it she added a sliced onion, a couple of peeled, cubed potatoes, and whatever chopped vegetables she had saved from salads. There might be celery, green pepper, scallions and radishes. Onions from cookouts, if any, were added. Everything was stirred together while cooking gently in the small quantity of fat. If more celery or green pepper seemed to Aunt Olivia like a good idea, she chopped and added those.

As soon as the onions and celery had cooked to translucency, and before they browned, Aunt Olivia emptied the glass jar containing cooking waters and meat, fish, and/or



poultry juices into the skillet. Over medium heat, the vegetables cooked to tenderness in the rich liquid. Ears of corn steamed on top. When the corn was done, Aunt Olivia removed the ears, let them cool, then cut the kernels from the cobs with a sharp knife. The kernels went into the skillet; the scraped cobs were discarded. The chowder base was ready; it was turned into a large kettle, allowed to cool, the flavors to blend.

An hour before mealtime, Aunt Olivia stirred enough milk into the mixture to make six or eight bowls of chowder. To a quart of base she used up to six cups of milk. Placing the chowder kettle over a low fire and allowing the mixture to

warm slowly, she was careful not to let it reach a simmer.

Ten or fifteen minutes before serving time, Aunt Olivia taste-tested for salt and pepper, added several sprigs of finely snipped parsley, crumbled in a few leaves of tarragon, and raised the heat to bring her chowder almost to a boil. At this time, too, she put in any leftover chicken meat or fish flakes she had saved. Or a bit of gravy that hadn't been used. She watched the pot carefully, stirring and tasting often at this stage. When it steamed, she ladled the chowder into warm soup bowls in which she had placed about half-a-teaspoon of butter. A big bowl of oyster crackers was ready on the table so we could all help ourselves. No one needed to be called twice.

Nothing Special Chowders were never exactly alike. Sometimes Aunt Olivia used chicken bouillon instead of fish juices for the base. Or, depending on the fish we'd eaten, her seasoning varied. Blue fish is stronger than haddock; halibut differs from codfish; juices of any of them enhance a chowder, but Aunt Olivia might use rosemary in one and tarragon with the other.

There's no law a chowder must include green pepper; it may be prepared with no celery at all; some chowders start with bacon fat, some with salt pork, some with butter, some with chicken fat. Onions... a little or a lot... are important. And potato. And milk. Aunt Olivia didn't consider it possible to make chowder without a small quantity of onion and a generous amount of potato, and she had no stomach at all for Manhattan chowder. Given cooking waters from vegetables, a bit of left-over fish or fowl, corn (fresh, frozen, or canned... creamed or kernel-style, didn't matter) was optional, and milk, a chowder could incorporate whatever else in her ice box she thought would taste right.

Aunt Olivia possessed a sixth sense about foods that complimented other food; she knew what would taste good when combined with what. Partly, of course, she had learned from experience but, partly too, she was blessed with a talent, an ability to imagine which herbs or seasonings would make a meat recipe or a fish plate or a chicken dish taste better than usual.

Aunt Olivia practiced her art, enjoyed her art. Through it, she found joy in giving pleasure to those she loved.