

Soup and Serendipity: Gazpacho

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I got this recipe for gazpacho in the style of Córdoba from a friend I met in the hills of Tennessee long ago. We were both attached to men doing research at a remote physics laboratory, and the two of us, she from Madrid and I from New York, were isolated in that alien landscape. Spanish had been my major in college and I spoke it passably well. Friendship was inevitable.

My friend's mother, a native of Córdoba, taught her how to make the gazpacho. Traditionally it must have been prepared with a food mill or mortar and pestle. Fortunately for me, those gadgets had been replaced by the blender. Cooking baffled me in those days; every dish I tried to make -- braised, sautéed, baked, boiled -- ended up an inedible charred or gooey mess. With a recipe that required no culinary skill I was more successful. On sultry Tennessee evenings that echoed with the clamor of tree insects, the gazpacho was pleasant to eat.

After a couple of years, we all moved elsewhere, and although my friend and I exchange notes and photos at Christmas, we haven't seen each other for decades. But from early on, her gazpacho became a summer staple in my home and so it has remained.

Makes 4-6 servings

1 cucumber, peeled and cut into quarters
1 bell pepper (red, yellow, orange, or green), cored and cut into large chunks
2 medium-sized tomatoes (or more), cut in half
1 or 2 cloves garlic
1 egg (optional)
1/4 to 1/3 cup of extra virgin olive oil
2 to 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
Thick slice of day-old crusty bread
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Put the oil, bread, garlic, vinegar, egg (if using), salt, and pepper into a 6-cup blender and process until the ingredients attain a thick, smooth, creamy consistency. Next add the vegetables in batches, first the cucumber and pepper and then the tomatoes, chopping as you go along and adding water as needed. When the vegetables are very finely chopped, add enough water to top off the container and run the blender at high speed until the soup is homogenized. Pour the gazpacho into a serving dish and refrigerate for several hours. Served chilled.

Does the recipe seem vague? It is. I've always made gazpacho from memory; I write it down here for the first time. So it's bound to be approximate.

And that's how it should be. Exact weights and measures won't improve gazpacho. Everything depends on the quality of the vegetables. The raw ingredients -- unadorned with herbs or spices other than pepper and untouched by the subtle alchemy of heat -- they alone determine the success of the dish. You hope it's a good year for tomatoes and seek out the best when they're at their most succulent (i.e., the later in the season the better).

With some good produce in hand, you can adapt the recipe to your own preferences. It originally called for an egg, which I omit and replace with an extra slice of bread and another dollop of olive oil. I've used various kinds of bread: Italian, French, whole wheat, challah (surprisingly suitable), pita (less suitable). And the olive oil? A good one is easier to find now than when I first got this recipe (the history of American cuisine in the latter part of the 20th century can be summed up by the change in the availability of olive oil -- from scarce and mediocre to ubiquitous and sometimes excellent).

Curiously enough, the etymology of "gazpacho" points to the fortuitous nature of the soup. According to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (<http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=gazpacho>), the word is probably derived, via Hispano-Arabic, from the Greek for a church alms box. The reference is presumably to the assorted donations, various coins or crusts of bread, left as alms, just as bits and pieces of bread and vegetable are used in the making of the soup. (If you've ever toured southern Spain during a drought and a heat wave, as I did some years ago, you'd know that under those conditions, the link between charity and a bowl of cold, tangy gazpacho can seem very literal.)



Isn't the recipe for gazpacho, variable and contingent on time and luck, also a recipe for scholarly research?

Once, when I was a graduate student, I asked a professor for advice on how to proceed with a research project. I was expecting a brief tutorial on the use of catalogues and library resources, but perhaps because he was a poet as well as a literary scholar, he shrugged those off.

"Serendipity," he said. "You'll find that you'll make your best discoveries by chance."

That wasn't the answer I wanted, but it turned out to be true, itself an instance of serendipity. You focus your research in one direction, work assiduously, and suddenly, spontaneously find what you're after in a place you hadn't thought to look. Or you hear of a conference or a call for submissions that just happens to coincide with an idea half-forming in your mind.

My curriculum vitae is, in fact, a record of the detours where serendipity has taken me. Isn't that the natural advantage of the independent scholar? We don't have to follow a prescribed path. If a happy accident leads us into new territory, we're free to go.

In time, my husband too became an independent scholar. There were several straightforward reasons for this, but in whimsical moments, I wonder if years of eating gazpacho, ingesting bowls of serendipity, didn't spoil him for a more contained life.