

The Spanish Roots of Classic Chicken Soup

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By Marissa Weitzman

One of my earliest and endearing memories from my childhood is with my Bubbie, Ruth Gipstein, and mother in the kitchen preparing matzoh ball soup for Passover. To reach the granite countertop, I would balance on a stepping stool and we would set up in an assembly line. Scoop the dough up, squish and roll it into a ball, and gently drop the sculpture into a pot of boiling water. After the balls were cooked, we placed them in chicken stock filled with a variety of vegetables. I enjoyed every slurp and filling bite of this soup at the table with my family.

Matzoh ball soup is commonly served as a traditional Passover dish, but did you also know that this soup is jokingly referred to as “Jewish Penicillin” and has medicinal powers?

The earliest recording of Jewish chicken soup dates all the way back to the 12th century. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher and physician from Spain, began prescribing “the broth of fowl” for ill patients to treat hemorrhoids, constipation, and even leprosy. He claimed that the broth made from the meat of hens and roosters had healing powers to relieve respiratory illnesses.

Chicken soup has been associated with Askenazic Jews, Jews from central Europe. Askenazic Jews made chicken soup because it was the cheapest meat to raise, resourceful, and prevented illnesses. It was flavored and seasoned with parsley, thyme, and often served with kneidlach (matzoh balls), kreplach (dumplings), or eggs.

In 2000, Dr. Stephan Rennard of the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha published a study in the medical journal, *Chest*, revealing that chicken soup has medicinal value. He conducted laboratory tests on blood samples from volunteers and showed that the soup inhibits the white blood cell, neutrophils, that defends against infection and causes inflammation, which in turn reduces congestion in the nasal passages. The exact ingredient has not been identified, however, it may be the combination of vegetables and chicken that cause the inhibitory effect. Although chicken soup is not the cure for the common cold, there is a scientific consensus that it does relieve symptoms by reducing congestions and improving nasal secretion flow.

Chicken soup contains many beneficial nutrients that help keep our bodies healthy. Sally Fallon, author of *Nourishing Traditions*, encourages the use of skin, meat, bones, and feet of the chicken because vital nutrients are secreted into the soup and can be absorbed in our body. Chicken contains many amino acids, including cysteine, which has similar properties as a common drug acetylcysteine, which is used to relieve symptoms of bronchitis. Additionally, other ingredients, such as carrots and onions, provide nutrients that act as anti-oxidants and prevent disease and infections.

Matzoh ball soup is more than just a traditional dish for Passover, it is a history story, a healing power, and a delicious, comforting meal.

Below is my Bubbie's chicken soup recipe that was passed down from watching her mother from Russia in the kitchen, and is now passed down to me.

Chicken Soup

Ingredients:

1 onion

1 whole Chicken

2 or 3 carrots

1 celery stick Parsley

2 tsp Kosher salt

1 ½ tsp Peppercorns

Preparation: Remove guts and butcher cut the chicken into 4 pieces. Place in large pot. Add a whole onion peeled, carrots cut into pieces about an inch long, a celery stick cut into a few pieces, a handful of parsley, kosher salt, and the peppercorns. Cover with water and cover pot and cook on low heat for an hour or so.

Remove chicken, carrots, and celery. Strain soup. Cool soup and place in refrigerator over night. Remove the fat, which will form on the top of the liquid. If you want to add a Spanish twist, add green chilies, garlic and potato.