



WELL SEASONED
BY SUZANNE PODHAIZER

Making Excellent Chicken Stock

THE EXTRACTION PHASE:

Place raw or roasted chicken bones, and if you like, a package of wings or other meaty bits, into a stockpot. Cover them generously with cold water and add a couple of tablespoons of high-quality vinegar or some lemon juice. Put on the lid and bring to a gentle simmer. Once the pot is simmering, carefully skim any scum that has risen to the top, replace the lid, and cook for six hours, adding water as needed to keep the bones deeply submerged.

During this phase, water moves into the bones, while molecules within the bones migrate toward areas of lower concentration in the surrounding liquid. Meanwhile, collagen strands unwind and convert into gelatin, giving the stock body.

THE REDUCTION PHASE:

Now you have a watery, bland infusion that's full of nutrients. Strain the liquid and compost the bones. Return the liquid to the pot and bring it to a boil. This time, leave the lid off. To make it delicious, cook at a low boil until it's significantly reduced, concentrating the flavor. The goal is to let water evaporate so the remaining liquid becomes deeply flavorful.

As the reduction progresses, watch for visual and textural cues for doneness, such as deepening color and increased viscosity. When I taste stock, I sprinkle a little salt onto each spoonful, which helps the other flavors pop. When it's ready, it will taste rich and savory, with a pleasing mouthfeel.

Another, slower test is to refrigerate the stock overnight. If it's gelatinous by morning, it's sufficiently reduced. If not, simmer it a bit longer. Eventually, you'll be able to recognize finished stock by look and taste alone, and it will turn jiggly in the fridge every time.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MEAT?

If you've included meaty pieces in the pot, let's add an extra step to the process. As soon as the meat is cooked through (165°), remove the bones from the pot temporarily, and spread them on a sheet pan to cool. When they're just barely touchable, pull the meat from the bones, and set it aside in a sealed container in the fridge. Then return the bones to the pot.

This method yields perfectly cooked meat that can be added to soups or casseroles while imparting extra flavor to the stock.

WHERE ARE THE SEASONINGS?

You may have noticed that there are no vegetables or herbs in the pot. For me, the focal point of this extraction-and-reduction process is coaxing all of the health giving, flavorful elements out of the chicken bones themselves. I prefer not to muddy the waters with other ingredients.

I also cook foods from all over the world. While the classic French trio of carrot, celery and onion is lovely, it makes little culinary sense in a pot of ramen or pho. Instead, I add aromatics when preparing a specific dish, seasoning with intention.

If you primarily cook New England fare, or foods rooted in French, Italian or Belgian traditions, you may find that adding mirepoix during the extraction phase — about two hours before the end — is the perfect move.

Finally, resist the urge to add salt while the stock is cooking. Reduction concentrates everything, including salt, and what once was well seasoned could end up tasting like a mouthful of seawater.

A FEW OTHER TIPS AND TRICKS

When building a stock into a soup, add ingredients that take the longest to cook first and the most delicate ingredients last. This will result in pleasing textures in the finished dish.

If you store plain stock, as I do, season it as you turn it into whatever you're making. Layer in herbs, spices, aromatic vegetables, acidic ingredients and salt, tasting and adjusting often. The last step before garnishing and serving should be a final taste and seasoning adjustment. Ask yourself: "Do I need a hint of chile pepper heat, or the bitter zip of a fresh herb?" "Is the salt sufficient to bring out all the other flavors and make them pop?" "Is there enough acidity to give the dish brightness?"

Pour soup over cooked pasta or white rice. Don't cook pasta or white rice in the soup. With a few exceptions, these starchy ingredients continue to absorb water after they're fully cooked. Left in a soup pot, you'll end up with floppy noodles and mushy rice. Other grains, including barley, wheat berries, freekeh, brown rice and wild rice, hold up better when left in the soup.

