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More information the web at
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When you hear the words comfort and food; what comes to mind? Do you think of something savory or sweet? When you need a little tender, loving care do you hunger for something hot, bubbling and fragrant with herbs and spice? Or maybe you crave something sugary, warm and gooey or seek solace in a cold and creamy or soft and chewy treat.

Or all of the above.

Comfort food is the food of our childhood. You slurp it or spoon it and savor it slowly. If you need a sharp knife to cut it, it's probably not comfort food. These are the dishes that warm us on snowy evenings, cheer us up on rainy days and console us when we are feeling blue.

Looking for the perfect comfort food? Well there is no one answer, it all depends on the kind comfort you need. Broken heart? Rocky-Road, cookie dough or butter pecan can't mend a broken heart but it might just ease the pain for an hour or two. Head cold? For those times when you wonder if you will ever breathe again, the best medicine might very well be a steaming bowl of chicken soup. And if a day on the slopes leaves you frozen to core, a piping hot stew with fork tender beef and vegetables is a great solution.

I was certainly in need of a little comfort last week when a torrential rain storm blew in. At midmorning it was almost as dark as the middle of the night. It stayed grey and murky all day. The storm did not blow in from the north with the brittle cold of an arctic gale. It blew in from California bringing the January Thaw with buckets of rain, fog and a damp, dreary, bone-chilling cold.

In spite of its annual or almost annual return, the January Thaw is an unexplained weather phenomenon. Most years the Thaw comes right smack in the middle of coldest days of the year. For weeks we shiver and shake bundled up in layers of wool and fleece and then suddenly the air is well ok it's not exactly balmy but it's at least ten degrees above normal. It could be my imagination but it seems to me that it always rains during the Thaw. Not a little shower, no, it's never a light, gentle rain. The January Thaw always seems to trigger a rip roaring deluge.

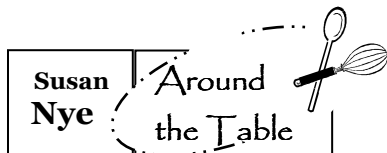
Which of course makes the annual Thaw the bane of every skier's existence. One day it's sunny and seasonably cold. The snow is perfect or close to it. You're not sure if you've died and landed in heaven or if you're dreaming. Suddenly, the dream becomes a nightmare and the nightmare becomes a reality. The basement floods, the porch roof collapses and worse, much worse, all that nice soft snow is washed away. It may stay warm for a day or two but before long the cold returns and the slopes become a vertical skating rink.

Is it any wonder I needed comfort? I thought about ice cream but not without chocolate sauce. In the end I found consolation in front of a cheery fire with a steaming mug of homemade soup and splurged on a lovely piece of soft brie and a nice glass of cabernet.

What dishes bring you comfort when your heart is breaking or the day turns dreary?

Stay warm and dry and bon appétit!

Susan



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Easy Cassoulet

In the '80's, foodies discovered cassoulet and spent three days making it. Try this simplified version and forget your miseries with family and friends around the table. With its origins in French farm kitchens, cassoulet is an absolutely delicious alternative to an old New England favorite – pork and beans. Enjoy!

Serves 12

4 ounces slab or thick cut bacon, roughly chopped *
12 ounces boneless, skinless turkey breast, cut into 2-inch cubes
12 ounces boneless pork, cut into 2-inch cubes
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
Flour
2 teaspoons dried thyme
2 bay leaves
1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
1/2 teaspoon chili flakes
1 large onion, chopped
3-4 carrots, chopped
3-4 stalks celery, chopped
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 cans (15-16 ounces each) white beans, drained and rinsed
1 cup dry vermouth
1-2 cup beef stock
1 can (14-16 ounces) crushed tomatoes
12 ounces pre-cooked kielbasa sausage, cut into 2-inch slices
1/2-1 cup bread crumbs
Garnish: fresh, chopped parsley

1. Cook the bacon until crispy in a heavy stovetop and ovenproof casserole over medium-low heat. Remove the bacon and reserve.
2. Season the turkey and pork with salt and pepper, lightly dust with flour and shake off the excess. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of bacon fat from the casserole and reserve. Raise the heat to medium-high. Brown the turkey and pork, adding more bacon fat to the pan as required. Remove from the casserole and reserve.
3. Reduce heat to medium; add a little more bacon fat and the onion, carrot and celery to the pot, sprinkle with salt and chili pepper and sauté for about 10 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté an additional 2 minutes. If you run out of bacon fat, substitute with olive oil.
4. Add the bacon, turkey, pork, beans, thyme, bay leaf, allspice, vermouth, beef stock and crushed tomatoes to the vegetables. Gently toss to combine, bring to a simmer and transfer to the oven.
5. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 1 hour. Add the sausage to the pot.
6. Sprinkle with the bread crumbs and bake for an additional 30-45 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley and serve.

The cassoulet is best made through step 5, cooled to room temperature and then refrigerated for several hours or overnight. Bring to room temperature, sprinkle with the bread crumbs and then bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes or until bubbling.

* For a slimmed down version of this recipe, skip the bacon and use a little olive oil to brown the meat and sauté the vegetables. Substitute regular kielbasa with a leaner turkey version.