

Lenny Karpman's entertaining and comprehensive journey with chicken soup ingredients, culture, wisdom and recipes from more than 100 countries is crafted to delight armchair food and travel lovers, ethnic cuisine aficionados, and adventurous cooks.

## **First You Boil A Chicken Food-Lover's Guide to the World's Chicken Soups**

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# **First You Boil a Chicken**

**Food-Lover's Guide to the World's Chicken Soups**

**Lenny Karpman MD**

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## **1. Introduction**

Mom launched her famous ship, *Ess Ess Mein Kind*, at least three times a day, every day. Translated from the Yiddish, its name was “eat, eat my child.” What we ate more than any other single dish was hot, steaming, golden chicken soup, served more ways than I can remember. Her mother, Fannie Rosen and Dad’s mom, Khana Karpman had done the same.

Some of the chicken-soup occasions were to usher in the Jewish Sabbath. Others were to begin any holiday feast, or as a stand-alone lunch on blustery days, or as a vehicle for kreplach (wonton like pasta packets) and knaidelach (matzo balls) or to help heal all ailments from a runny nose to a broken heart.

In Jewish folklore, chicken soup is a symbol of hope, health, prosperity, fertility and new beginnings. Thus, no traditional wedding or Jewish New Year celebration would be complete without it. Thoughts and feelings that waft up from this golden broth are tradition, nostalgia, comfort, family, security, spirituality, survival, stability and life itself. It spans the gamut from purest simplicity to regal transcendentalism.

My father’s family had a flock of black and white speckled chickens on their small farm in Russia. Grandma Khana used every part save the head and the blood. Feathers went into comforters and pillows. Diced bits of fat and skin became



cracklings called *gribines*. Fried up and salted, they were eaten atop soup or potatoes, in stuffing, in matzo balls or out of hand. The rendered fat was *schmaltz*, the traditional butter, lard and shortening equivalent in the *Ashkenazi* (Northern European) Jewish diet. Chopped chicken livers, *g'hakte laeber*, became coarse *pâté*. The other giblets, backs and feet flavored the soup. Tiny egg yolks contained in membranes within the hens, devoid of shell or white, went into the soup bowls of the youngest children or grandchildren. They were accompanied by such fanfare that little hands clapped for them. They tasted like creamy ordinary hard-boiled yolks, but were nonetheless received as if they were treasures.

Similar in size and taste, rooster testicles were something Grandma never made. I had them once in chicken soup in Hong Kong. They were creamier, almost pasty, like yolks that were not quite hard-boiled.

When Dad lived in a tenement in Hartford, he raised Rhode Island Red chickens on the roof and hatched fertile eggs on bags of salt, warmed in the oven by the pilot light. He turned 33 in 1944 and fulfilled a life-long dream. He bought a farm in Bloomfield, Connecticut, with chicken coops endowed with hot and cold running water and electricity. Before we moved in, he was drafted into the navy. He sold the farm. When the draft age for married men with children went from 34 to 32, he landed in

the interspace and was discharged before he was ever deployed. The new owner wouldn't sell. Dad couldn't buy the farm back.

After retiring, he and Mom moved to Northern California near my home. Nearly every summer, we went to the Petaluma, "The Chicken Capitol of the World" so he could admire dozens of varieties of prize chickens at the fairgrounds.

In his 92<sup>nd</sup> year, he was suffering from advancing dementia. His ramblings often included images of baby chicks, egg gathering and Grandma's chicken soup. My wife Joan and I decided to become Costa Rica residents. We moved him out of his assisted-living quarters in California and brought him with us to our small farm in Costa Rica's Central valley. We fenced off an area outside his bedroom, built a coop and adopted a small flock of poultry. They included reds, blacks, a pair of white Chinese silkies, a pair of guinea fowl and a lone rooster. He approved.

**Lisa Schroeder:** *"The common thread of motherhood is woven through many dishes around the world, but there is one dish nearly every mother in every country makes: chicken soup."*

## 5. In the Soup

### Matzo Balls

Called *knaidlach* in Yiddish, matzo balls are meatless dumplings made from matzo meal, coarse unleavened wheat flour. All the different brands of matzo meal have recipes for *knaidlach* on the box. The rule of thumb is that if you alter the ratio of meal to liquid, more meal yields heavier, denser dumplings and more liquid results in lighter, fluffier ones. The usual ratio is for every cup of matzo meal, you need about three large or four smaller eggs, a half cup of liquid, four tablespoons of chicken fat or about three and a half tablespoons of oil, salt, pepper and optional herbs and spices. It sounds simple and it is. Yet a matzo ball never escapes scrutiny and comment. The divide is between dense sinkers in the broth and light floaters; older folks seeming to favor the former, younger the latter.

Although most cooks lightly beat the eggs with a fork, some separate the whites from the yolks, beat the whites until stiff and gently fold in the yolks. The same cooks, who strive to incorporate more air into a lighter matzo ball, will use carbonated water for the liquid. Others settle for tap water or chicken broth. Chicken fat is often replaced by a lighter, less saturated vegetable oil in more modern health conscious kitchens. Substituting oil for chicken fat will also make the *knaidlach* lighter, but some of the richness will be gone.

Reva, a matzo ball maven from Poland, insists that only kosher salt imparts the proper flavor. The danger is that the large crystals may not disseminate evenly in the batter. She therefore uses warmed broth salted with kosher salt as her liquid of choice in making the batter. Many cooks add chopped green onion and/or parsley for flavor and a little color. My cousin Kari adds nutmeg. Reva seasons with ground ginger. I add a little ground caraway seed. Alas, what was so simple has become as much nuance as substance.

The wet ingredients and seasonings are mixed in a bowl into which the matzo meal is slowly added and stirred. The batter needs to be refrigerated for at least an hour, covered in plastic wrap. Wet or oiled hands then shape walnut-sized rounds and drop them into a large pot of boiling water, salted with about a teaspoon per quart. Cover and simmer for about half an hour. They will triple or quadruple in size. Remove to a platter and cover with a tea towel or more plastic wrap. Reheat when ready to serve and add to the soup. Each cup of matzo meal should yield a dozen to a dozen and a half *knaidlach*. We never used baking powder during Passover to make them fluffy, because it was verboten. We did add about two teaspoons of baking powder to the batter (one cup of matzo meal portion) during the rest of the year. Now, I hear that special baking powder, approved for Passover by the Rabbinates, is available in New York.

During the Passover holiday, I make enough soup for at least four meals. It makes sense to also prepare enough *knaidlach* to go with the soup. When boiling a large number, you might consider using an oversized vessel so they all have space to float atop the salted boiling water. I drain the extras and put two or three in each of a number of plastic zip-lock sandwich bags and freeze them. I drop the sealed bags in boiling water for about twenty minutes to reheat and add them to subsequent bowls of hot chicken liquid ambrosia. Jeff Nathan, owner/chef of Abigail's, New York's largest kosher restaurant, drapes his matzo balls in a *sofrito* of onion, tomato, cilantro and green and red peppers.

Oh humility. Must we create everything from scratch? Matzo balls made from a packaged mix, to which Aunt Rose added a little canola oil and a pinch of celery salt, were as delicious as any of our elitist labor-intensive alternatives.

**Dad:** *"This chicken soup is so rich and robust, that even Tanta Chaika's heavy-as-lead matzo balls would float in it."*

## Wontons

How extraordinary wontons seemed at the time! When I was 15 (55 years ago), we moved from Hartford, Connecticut to New York City. The world exploded into my eyes, ears, nostrils

and mouth. I got a summer job in Lower Manhattan's financial district and spent all my non-working hours exploring. Chinatown was within walking distance and the Hong Fat Company on Mott Street became my shared favorite destination along with the Fulton Fish Market and an importer warehouse, Eagle Bag and Burlap Company.

At Hong Fat, I sat in the back where I could watch a pair of women turn a two-foot-high mound of pink chopped filling and stacks of thin dough rounds into hundreds of wontons. A bowl of wonton soup with about ten wontons in it cost 50 cents in 1954. On alternate visits, I ate pork *lo mein* instead. Both were so large that I could only consume one or the other. For 60 cents, one could buy a dozen uncooked wontons to go. To my chagrin, the Health Department put the kibosh on the sale of uncooked wontons a few years later.

Since the advent of pre-made wonton wrappers in markets throughout the world, preparation has become a breeze. To construct your own wonton, place an individual wrapper in front of you with the powdery (cornstarch) side down. Cover the wrappers-in-waiting with a moist tea towel so they don't become dry and brittle. To assemble, set the diamond-shaped wrapper with a corner near you. Place a small scoop of filling just inside the corner. Fold away from you point first, until the folded tube becomes the base of a triangle below the unfolded portion.

Leaving the top peak alone, bring the other two points together using a dab of egg white as glue.

For the filling, mince together ground pork, shrimp meat, water chestnuts, black mushrooms and bamboo shoots. For every cupful add a teaspoon each of cornstarch and rice wine or dry sherry and half teaspoon of salt or soy sauce, a pinch of white pepper and a pinch of sugar. Mix well. I like to add a little minced ginger, a few drops of seasoned sesame oil and finely diced garlic chive. Other options include finely chopped cilantro, watercress and/or green onion, a pinch of five-spice powder, a little MSG, chopped scallops or shredded crabmeat.

It is best to boil the wontons separately from the soup for a few minutes to cook off the surface cornstarch. Then they can be added to the soup for about five or six more minutes of simmering to cook the ingredients. Overcooking will excessively soften and fragment the wrappers.

The soup itself usually is loaded with any combination of green vegetables and meats – including *bok choy*, carrots, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, roast pork slices, shrimp and chicken.

For convenience, you can freeze uncooked wontons, wrappers and filling for several weeks and proceed when you have a new batch of soup made.

In southern China, wonton soup is usually part of a *dim sum* brunch or lunch, rather than as a centerpiece for the main meal. For center stage cornucopia elegance and belly-filling size, try *wor wonton* soup. *Wor* means “everything” and the soup contains all the usual stuff plus additions of squid, fish balls, eggs, duck, clams, scallops, pork liver, beef slices, sweet sausage and/or many other ingredients in any conceivable combination.

*Kuo tieh, har gow, siu mai, fan gor* and a host of other Chinese dumplings are not usually boiled or served in broth. One truly exotic variation on the chicken soup and dumpling theme is a Shanghai style pastry purse of a very large dumpling, filled with rich gelatinous chilled chicken soup reduction. The purse is steamed in a bamboo basket atop cabbage leaves, cooking the outer pastry and heating the soup within. Steam escapes through a top hole. The dumpling with soup inside is served in a bowl after delicate transfer from the basket. I had it many years ago in the Mayflower Restaurant on Geary Blvd. and 25<sup>th</sup> Street in San Francisco and again in Shanghai.

### **Kreplach**

*Kreplach* have been labeled Jewish versions of Chinese wontons or Italian tortellini. Similarly, they are filled pasta packets, boiled and usually served in hot chicken soup or broth. There is no commonality beyond that. The wrapper is thicker



than wontons, the size larger than tortellini, the shape triangular and filling Slavic rather than Asian or Mediterranean.

During my younger years, we were relatively poor. We ate the cheapest cuts of beef, usually offal, from the slaughterhouse. Even then, Mom extended the organ meats with potatoes, rice, carrots, beans, parsnips and turnips in stews, casseroles, pot-pies and shepherds pies. Her *kreplach* were savory splendor despite the filling components. She cooked minced beef lung and heart with onions, garlic, salt and black pepper in a skillet in chicken fat or Crisco. When we had left over garbanzos in the fridge, they were ground into the mix.

In later, more affluent, times, she stuffed the triangles with similarly seasoned ground beef and mushrooms. For Mom and Dad's fiftieth wedding anniversary, I made *kreplach* for a party honoring them. The menu included brisket simmered for hours in carrots, onions, celery and fennel. I used part of the brisket, barely chopped in a blender with wild mushrooms and a little port, to fill *kreplach*. Yes they were sumptuous, but the over-riding ingredient was nostalgia.

The wrapper dough consisted of two cups of flour, two eggs, a tablespoon of water and half teaspoon of salt, well kneaded until smooth. Rolled out to a thickness about twice that of a wonton wrapper, the sheets were cut into three-inch squares, filled with a teaspoon of the meat mixture and folded over to form a triangle. Other cooks brought the two widest tips together

to make the same belly button shape of tortellini. The edges were pressed together with the tines of a fork and sealed with a little water. Mom boiled them in salted water for about twenty minutes, drained them in a colander and reheated them in chicken broth before serving. She always garnished with chopped parsley.

Dad liked the cold leftover *kreplach* with sour cream, a meat and milk mixture he would have eschewed had he cared about kosher laws. He characterized his religion as “proselytizing atheist,” despite his orthodox upbringing. Yet he waxed eloquent about the grandeur of high-holiday tradition, culture and cuisine. It was emblematic of the journeys from near starvation to happy family banquets, from insular *shtetl* dogma to cosmopolitan higher education, from paranoid isolationism to ecumenical humanism.

*Kreplach* preparation is a labor intensive task, but never too difficult to make for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, or for the somber celebration meal at the end of Yom Kippur’s 24 hour fast. The formerly indispensable regal additions to holiday chicken soup have all but disappeared from the culture. A few years ago, I was served hamburger in store-bought won ton skins in chicken soup at a Purim dinner in Budapest. The cook proudly misrepresented her packets as *kreplach*.

## Tortellini

The much bally-hooed regional Italian cuisines of Tuscany, Sicily and Rome don't compare to Emilia-Romagna in my limited experience. Admittedly, I was in Bologna only once, and for two weeks some twenty-five years ago. Despite daily damp winter drizzles, I explored the innards of scores of markets and trattorias. In the markets, I discovered local *mortadella di Bologna* - the original bologna, *prosciutto di Parma* - queen of thin sliced Italian ham, *parmigiano reggiano* - the ultimate source of grated cheese, *aceto balsamico* - balsamic vinegar in the Modena tradition, *ragù* - rich meat sauce and innumerable fresh egg pastas including the local favorite child - tortellini.

At one trattoria, about the same size as Hong Fat in New York's Chinatown, I sat in the back with a view of the kitchen. *Déjà vu*. Two women were hand-rolling *tortellini* from a pile of meat filling and stacks of pasta squares. These two differed from their won ton making counterparts in only four ways: their heads were covered, they spoke Italian rather than Cantonese, they used their fingers and a spoon instead of chopsticks and they sealed their little packets with water, not egg wash. *Tortellinis* share the shape of *kreplach*, but are smaller and the wrapper thinner. They are called "little belly buttons."

The filling, I was told, contained all local products – pork butt cubes browned in butter, *mortadella* and *prosciutto* - coarsely ground, moistened with beaten eggs, seasoned with salt,

a few red pepper flakes and nutmeg and mixed with grated *parmigiano reggiano*. The meats were two parts pork per one part each of the other two. They used about three eggs and two cups of grated cheese per kilo of the mixture.

The pasta was a cup of flour per egg, kneaded, rolled out and cut into thin squares. A teaspoonful of filling went into the middle, it was folded into a triangle and the outer two corners were wrapped around a finger, dabbed with water and pinched together. No matter how the little belly buttons are ultimately served, it seems that in Bologna they are all cooked first in chicken broth.

The trattoria served tortellini in Bologna *ragù* (the premier meat and tomato sauce in all of Italy), in a rich brown beef gravy or in chicken broth. I chose the broth and sipped a slightly bubbly local pignoletto white wine with it.

Dried packaged *tortellini* come in a variety of colors with cheese, meat or vegetable fillings. Though they are poor cousins to freshly-made, they afford a handy meal, simmered in chicken broth.

## Dumplings

Describing different combinations of flour, egg, water and salt can cure insomnia. To maintain wakefulness, skimming the following paragraphs is permissible.

At home in Costa Rica, when I make dumplings for chicken soup other than matzo balls, I combine equal parts of fresh salty local white cheese crumbled as finely as I can and masa harina, cornmeal, into twice the volume of all-purpose wheat flour. I season with caraway powder, nutmeg and black pepper. The cheese contributes sufficient salt. Half as much milk as wheat flour creates the ideal consistency. With oiled hands, I roll walnut-size balls and gently lower them into simmering soup, carefully avoiding overcrowding and cover for six or seven minutes.

Mom mixed together and kneaded into smooth dough, two cups of flour, a quarter cup of oil, a half-cup of milk, three eggs and a teaspoon of salt. She dropped teaspoon-size balls into boiling water and, when they were done, transferred them into soup.

Grandma made dumplings she called *nockerl*. She beat four eggs with a half-cup of water and mixed in a cup of flour and a teaspoon each of salt and baking powder. She boiled her *nockerl* like mom boiled her dumplings.

Dr. Dorothee Perloff turned 80 in December 2008. She learned to make spaetzle from her German pediatrician mother. Her grandmother was also a physician. Her batter was a little thicker and drier than standard dumpling dough. It arose from a similar meld of flour, eggs, milk and salt, albeit with more flour. She rolled the dough into long skinny cigar shapes. With a pair,

of scissors, she cut off inch long little logs above a pot of boiling chicken soup. The *spaetzle* reduced the temperature of the soup a little. When, after about five minutes, the dumplings floated to the surface, we consumed them in their soup. In Vienna, I had *spaetzle* boiled first, then lightly browned in butter, topped with parsley and served with sour cream on the side.

The only paprika-free dish I ate in Budapest was chicken broth and *spaetzle* made from a kind of cream of wheat called *majgombac*. *Csipek* are Hungarian-style firmer *spaetzle*. They are predominantly served with goulash, more of a soup than a stew in Hungary. They are also served with other soups, including chicken.

In Germany, we had potato dumplings - mashed potato, flour, eggs, salt, pepper and butter coated with breadcrumbs, boiled and served aside anything that came with gravy. They were similar in taste and texture to Italian gnocchi.

I did have a bowl of chicken soup with potato dumplings in Krakow, Poland. They were not breadcrumb-coated. When I tried to order them a second time in another restaurant, they came cold with stewed red plums, not soup.

While we were eating *pelmeni* in chicken broth in a Russian restaurant in San Francisco, an Iraqi companion volunteered that his mother made similar meat filled dumplings called *koobe* when he was a child. Indeed, both are made from small balls of dumpling dough, indented with a thumb, stuffed

with savory ground meat, sealed and boiled. In Russia, the meat mixture is usually half pork, half beef – in Iraq, all beef. *Pelmeni* also contain more pepper and grated onion than *koobe*.

In the Czech Republic, we ate liver dumplings in chicken soup. The liver was usually chicken, but duck and beef liver are options. Ground liver is mixed with flour, breadcrumbs, egg, garlic, onion, salt, pepper, parsley and marjoram. Similar liver dumplings exist all over Central and Eastern Europe. Dense Czech potato dumplings are a side dish only.

In Korea we ate marvelous savory meat filled dumplings, *mandu*, by the dozen. They were steamed, not boiled, and came in bamboo baskets with ginger-soy-hot pepper dipping sauce. Generally, Korean cuisine is very much to my liking. Atypically under-seasoned, weak chicken broth with pasty flavorless boiled flour dumplings came as a side dish along myriad delicious side plates at most dinner houses in Seoul. What a disconnect.

Yes, *gnocchi* are Italian dumplings usually made from potatoes and flour, but also from semolina and ricotta cheese. I have eaten them in chicken broth in the United States, but never in Italy where they are served in red, green or brown sauces or under melted butter or cheese. The usual ingredients are just flour, mashed potato, egg and water as needed. Oh, so simple, yet very difficult for the neophyte. For starters, you need to select thick-skinned baking potatoes, drier than their trendy cousins - new potatoes or Yukon gold. Next, bake them - don't boil them.

Third, mash them smooth and add less flour by about 25% than your recipe requires. Fourth, use egg yolks rather than whole eggs. Fifth, don't freeze them. They become glue-like when defrosted. Last, consider skipping one thru five and buying them fresh from a pasta/ravioli factory or deli.

In sub-Saharan Africa, chicken soup thickened with ground nuts (peanuts) is often served with dumplings made with starch from yam, cassava, taro root, plantain, processed potato flakes or mixed semolina and ground rice. The dumplings vary from culture to culture, but collectively, they are called *fufu*. They may be poached balls or dishes with the consistency of slightly dry mashed potatoes. In the latter case, the diner picks up a small handful and rolls the *fufu*, adding it directly into the soup or stew.

In Northern Argentina, ground cooked chicken, eggs and flour meatball/dumplings go into the soup in which the chicken originally cooked.

Japan is an enchanted land of treats called dumplings – tofu and crab balls, ginger beef *gyozas*, sweet rice balls, *korokke* - potato fried dumplings, pickled seaweed wrapped savory meat and root vegetable, *dango jiru* (*mochi* flour, *miso*, *dashi* and white fish) and one of the world's best desserts, *mochi* dumplings filled with sweet red bean or lotus paste.

My favorite is a pancake batter round ball surrounding a tender chunk of octopus. What looks like a heavy metal muffin



tin sits over heat. The indentations are hemispheres. Batter goes into the wells and begins to crust golden brown. Precooked octopus is dropped into the center and more batter goes on top. The cook spins each ball in its well with chopsticks until a perfect globe the size of a golf ball is complete. The crispy shell surrounds custard-like batter with the seafood morsel in the center – sweet and savory, crunchy and creamy. However, none of the Japanese dumplings that I know are boiled and served in chicken soup. They are often sold in orders of eight, more than most couples can consume.

***Masataka Kobayashi*** (paraphrased from “*The Great Chefs*” television series):

*He was called Masa for short and his restaurant, Masa’s, was an Elysium among San Francisco restaurants. He died an untimely violent death.*

*Every morning, he prepared ten gallons of stock – two gallons each of chicken, fish, game, lamb and veal. It was his hallmark that no plate left the kitchen with fewer than two sauces.*

Lenny Karpman's entertaining and comprehensive journey with chicken soup ingredients, culture, wisdom and recipes from more than 100 countries is crafted to delight armchair food and travel lovers, ethnic cuisine aficionados, and adventurous cooks.

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