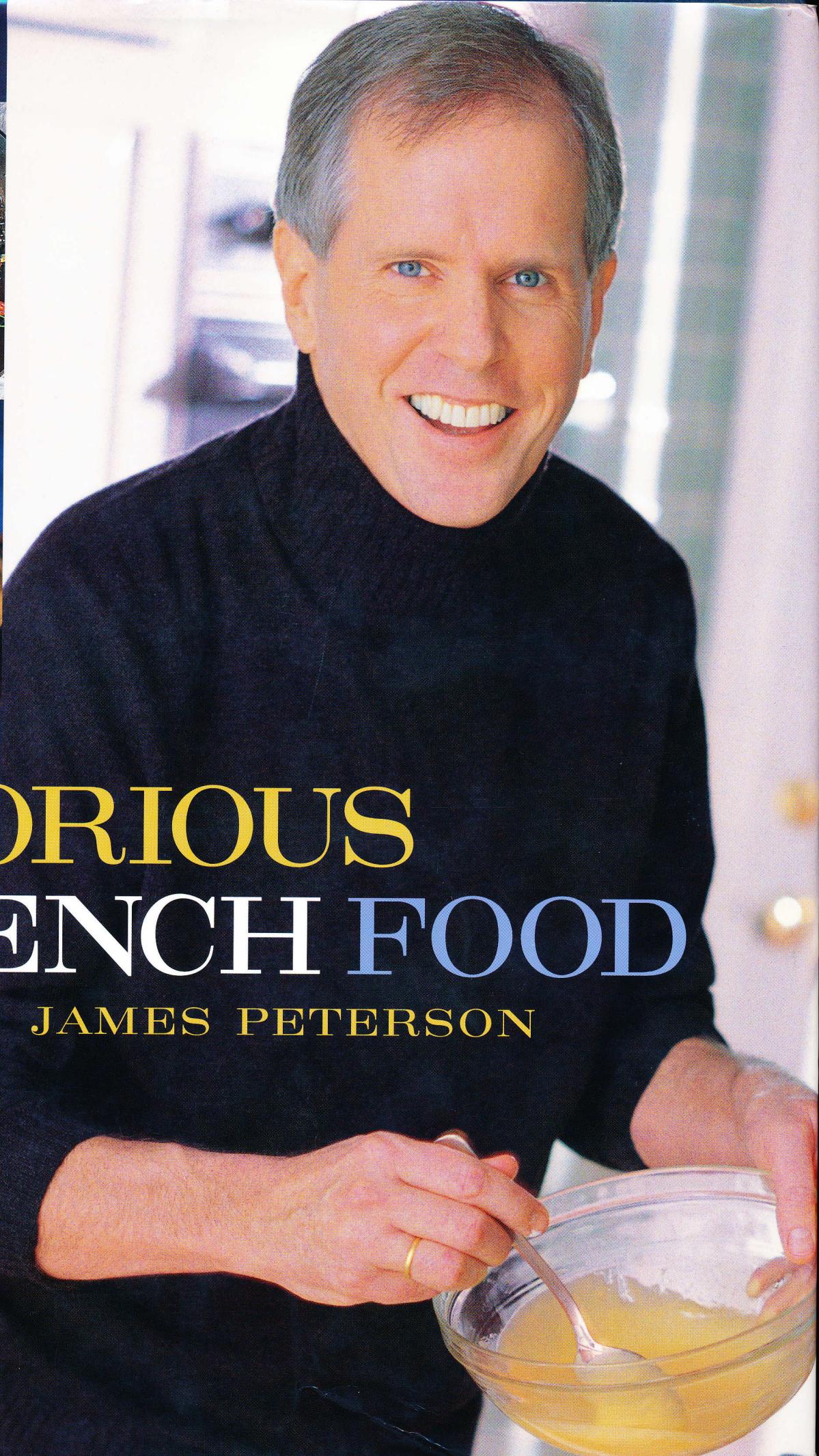


GLORIOUS FRENCH FOOD

JAMES PETERSON

A FRESH
APPROACH
TO THE
CLASSICS



Garlic Soups

Soupes à l'Ail

GARLIC AND ONIONS ARE A NATURAL PAIR.

Both are pungent and aromatic and profoundly comforting. They've provided sustenance, spiritual and physical, to the poor and hardworking for aeons. Many a simple dish is based on garlic or onions alone. Together or separately, they're indispensable for almost all savory dishes. It's hard to imagine life without them.

A number of French provinces have their own versions of *soupe à l'ail*, with slight variations, but in spirit virtually the same. Typically, a broken-up head of garlic is simmered in water until it softens, and the soup is strained and poured over a chunk of crusty bread. When the garlic is worked hard through the strainer, the garlic pulp adds a creamy body to the soup, but if the soup is just strained, it becomes a sort of tea, a tonic for the weary or sick. Some recipes call for flavoring the soup with bay leaves and thyme, others sage. I sometimes use fresh marjoram. In one version, a *soupe à l'ail* from the Auvergne, a slice of toast is rubbed with a garlic clove and dribbled with olive oil (like a Tuscan bruschetta), water is poured over it, and the serving is sprinkled with grated cheese. Some recipes call for chicken broth; others, more frugal, suggest using the cooking water from beans. In some regions, such as the Béarn, they add eggs or egg yolks and a dash of vinegar.

Garlic broth made by first roasting the garlic will have a subtle dimension that boiled garlic does not. Just wrap the unpeeled cloves in aluminum foil with a sprinkling of water and bake them in a 375°F [190°C/gas mark 5] oven for about 45 minutes. If you want to go all out, you can finish the garlic broth by whisking in some *aioli* (about 3 tablespoons per cup of broth) and returning it to the heat, but don't let it boil or the egg yolk in the *aioli* will curdle.

One word of warning: You and all who join you in eating this soup are going to reek for 24 hours. Avoid elevators and close contact with anyone except your fellow diners.

GARLIC SOUP

SOUPE À L'AIL

MAKES 4 SERVINGS (1 QUART)

- 4 small-to-medium heads of garlic, preferably the kind that's stained with purple, broken up into cloves and roasted (see garlic soups introduction at left)
- 5 cups (1.1 l) water, homemade chicken broth, cooking liquid from dried beans, or a mixture of all three
- 5 sprigs fresh thyme or marjoram and 3 sage leaves (or ½ teaspoon dried thyme and 1 bay leaf)
- salt
- pepper
- 1 tablespoon good wine vinegar, or more to taste
- 2 beaten eggs (optional)
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
- 4 slices crusty French bread, preferably a bit stale

DON'T bother to peel the roasted garlic cloves, just combine with the water and herbs in a small pot. Simmer, covered, for about 30 minutes, until the garlic is completely soft and you can easily crush one of the cloves against the inside of the pot.

WORK the soup through a food mill or purée it in a blender and then work it through a strainer with the back of a ladle to extract as much of the garlic pulp as possible. Season the soup to taste with salt, pepper, and vinegar.

IF you're using the beaten eggs, whisk some of the soup into them and return the mixture to the pot. Reheat the soup while stirring, but don't get it so hot that the egg curdles. Add the parsley, arrange a slice of bread in each heated soup plate, and ladle the soup over it.

Variations: I sometimes add cream, but only when I want to make the soup more substantial. I recently made a fabulous discovery: Garlic soup makes a delicious meatless broth to use as the basis for more elaborate soups and stewlike concoctions. One recent experiment involved gently sweating a little onion in duck fat, adding shredded duck confit (see page 383 for more about confit), pouring garlic broth over these, and garnishing the soup with little cubes of bread, also cooked in duck fat, to add crunch. Another evening, this evolved into a more substantial main course, involving slices of bread gently browned on both sides in duck fat, a heated confit duck leg placed on the bread, and, again, the garlic broth poured over and around. The bread can be replaced with cooked chard or spinach or a heap of cooked beans, and the shredded duck confit replaced with cubes of pancetta or prosciutto end. Garlic broth also makes an excellent base for tomato soup: Cut peeled, seeded, and chopped tomatoes into cubes and add them to the finished soup, or simmer the tomatoes with the garlic and strain everything at once. (For another tomato soup recipe, see page 183.)

Garlic broth—without the egg—also makes a great poaching or steaming liquid for seafood. Throw some mussels or clams into the strained soup and simmer until they open (some saffron and/or tomatoes could come into play here). Poach fish steaks in garlic broth, place the individual servings of fish on toasted bread slices or mounds of vegetables, and pour the garlic broth over and around.

You can also use garlic broth as the base for a vegetable soup: Just toss in fresh shell beans, peas, cubes of tomato, sections of string beans, shredded leafy greens (chard, spinach, sorrel), mushrooms (cultivated or wild), and fresh or dried chiles (chopped or, if dried, shredded and toasted in a skillet).

Try replacing the fava beans in the following recipe with baby peas (even frozen will do) or 1-inch [2.5 cm] lengths of thin string beans, which should be precooked in boiling salted water just until they lose their crunch, about 5 minutes.

GARLIC, DUCK CONFIT, FAVA BEAN, AND FRESH CHARD SOUP

SOUPE À L'AIL
AUX CONFIT DE CANARD,
AUX FÈVES FRAÎCHES,
ET AUX BLETTE S

MAKES 4 MAIN-COURSE SERVINGS

- 5 confit duck legs (see recipe, page 382, or Sources)
- 1 medium-size onion, chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons duck fat from confit
- 1 bunch green Swiss chard (1 pound) [450 g], white stems removed, leaves washed
- 1 quart (1 recipe) Garlic Soup (page 194), without the egg
- salt
- pepper
- 1 pound [450 g] fava beans, shucked and peeled (about 3/4 cup; see page 65 for more about fava beans)
- 4 slices crusty French bread, preferably a bit stale, lightly toasted

PULL the meat off one of the confit legs. Combine the meat with the onion and duck fat in a heavy-bottomed pot and cook over medium heat while stirring, until the onion turns translucent, about 10 minutes.

ROLL up the chard leaves and slice them into 1/2-inch [1.5 cm] strips. Put the chard in a small pan large enough to hold the remaining 4 duck legs in a single layer. Arrange the duck legs on top of the chard and ladle 1 cup of the garlic broth over them. Cover the pan and place it over medium heat. When the liquid starts to boil, turn the heat down to low. Cook for about 10 minutes—long enough to heat through the legs.

POUR the remaining garlic broth into the onion mixture and simmer gently for 10 minutes. Season the broth to taste with salt and pepper, but leave it slightly undersalted because the confit is very salty. A couple of minutes before serving, toss the fava beans into the broth.

PLACE 1 slice of toast each in the bottom of 4 heated wide soup plates. Place a mound of chard on top of each slice, and a confit leg—handle them gently, they're fragile—on top of the chard. Pour the broth left in the pan used to heat the duck legs into the pot with the rest of the hot garlic broth. Ladle the broth into each plate, making sure everybody gets a share of fava beans.

SERVING CHICKEN WITH GARLIC BROTH: If you don't have confit duck legs and you don't want to toy with fava beans, you can make a similar dish using chicken. I recommend sweating a little prosciutto end, pancetta, or bacon with onions to round out the garlic broth's flavor and give it extra complexity, but these aren't essential. I like to use chicken breasts with the bone in and the skin attached; they have a lot more flavor. But if you're in a hurry, boneless chicken breasts are still great.

SAUTÉED CHICKEN BREASTS IN GARLIC BROTH WITH TOMATOES, SPINACH, SAFFRON, AND BASIL

POULET SAUTÉ À LA SOUPE À L'AIL, ET AUX TOMATES, SAFRAN, ET BASILIC

MAKES 4 MAIN-COURSE SERVINGS

- 2 double bone-in chicken breasts, or 4 individual bone-in half breasts
- salt
- pepper
- 2 to 4 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 medium-size onion, chopped fine
- 1/4 pound [115 g] prosciutto end, pancetta, or bacon, cut into 1/4-inch [.5 cm] cubes
- 1 pound [450 g] spinach, stemmed and washed, or two 10-ounce [280 g] bunches (optional)
- 1 quart (1 recipe) Garlic Soup (page 194), without the egg
- leaves from 1 bunch basil, about 40 leaves
- 3 medium-size tomatoes (about 1 pound total), peeled, seeded, and chopped
- 1 pinch saffron threads, soaked for 30 minutes or more in 1 tablespoon water (optional)

IF you're using double bone-in chicken breasts, turn them upside down and cut them in half by pressing a chef's knife straight down into the center of the underside of the breastbone and bringing the knife all the way through one side of the breast. Repeat,

going in the other direction. Season the breasts with salt and pepper and sauté them skin-side down first, in a pan just large enough to hold them in a single layer, over medium heat in 2 tablespoons of olive oil.

WHEN the chicken breasts are well browned on both sides and bounce back to the touch (meaning they are cooked through), 8 to 10 minutes on each side, transfer them to a plate and keep them warm. Pour all but about 1 tablespoon of fat out of the sauté pan. (If the bottom of the pan has burned, wash the pan out and start over with 2 tablespoons of fresh oil.) Stir in the chopped onion and prosciutto cubes. Cook over medium heat, stirring every couple of minutes, until the onion turns translucent, about 10 minutes.

WHILE the onions are cooking, put the spinach in a pan with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup [125 ml] of the garlic broth. Sprinkle the basil with 1 teaspoon of olive oil, chop coarse, and reserve.

WHEN the onions are done, put the pan with the spinach on high heat.

POUR the rest of the garlic broth, the tomatoes, and the saffron and its soaking liquid into the pan with the onions, or use a bigger pot if you need to, and bring the resulting soup to a simmer.

WHEN the spinach has “melted,” after 1 or 2 minutes, spoon it into hot soup plates. Pour any broth left in the pan into the rest of the garlic broth. Place a chicken breast on top of the spinach. Stir the chopped basil into the soup and season to taste with salt and pepper. Ladle the soup over and around the chicken.

Variations: You can substitute any leafy vegetable you want—chard, sorrel, beet greens—for the spinach or just use a slice of toasted bread. If you want this dish to look really dramatic, “deconstruct” the various elements. Instead of the garlic broth, use a lightly creamed chicken broth; chop the basil very fine, almost like a pesto; heat the chopped tomatoes separately; and make a saffron aioli (see page 491). Arrange the chicken breasts in the bowls, dribble the saffron aioli over them; add the pesto; and dollop the tomatoes in little mounds here and there. The effect is a dramatic tangle of colors, and the flavors change with each bite.