

Cooking with Julia: Corn chowder with bread



Julia Hansen

These days it seems that corn is everywhere. It's in our fuel, at our summer barbecues, in biodegradable packaging, in desserts with corn syrup and in livestock feeders. If you're from Missouri or any state bordering it (especially Iowa), you probably have driven by millions of cornfields in your lifetime. When I was little and my family would drive to my grandpa's house in Illinois, I would stare out the window bored out of my mind because I would see a cornfield,

then cows, then a cornfield, then cows. The repetition never seemed to end. Now that I'm a bit older, the corn-cow repetition doesn't bore me as much as make me smile. I hope I don't lose a few people who read my column by saying one of my favorite things to do in the summer is to take a drive with my windows down in the countryside through fields while listening to country music.

Did you know that Iowa, (only minutes north of Kirksville) is the United States' top producer of corn? According to the Web site iowacorn.org, Iowa produced 2.5 billion bushels of corn over 13.9 million acres of farmland in 2007. A standard bushel of corn is 56 pounds (with husks and cobs removed) which means 140 trillion pounds of corn were produced in one year alone! Most of this harvested corn, however, is not sweet corn, which is what we buy in the grocery store for corn on the cob or corn chowder. Most of Iowa's harvested corn is field corn, which is used for other purposes like livestock feeders and ethanol fuel.

So, as I sit at my house writing my column, I eat my tasty corn chowder, curse Kirksville's weather (it's 11 degrees and windy) and look forward to my upcoming summer drives by cornfields with George Strait playing on the radio.

Ingredients:

3 cups frozen whole-kernel corn
 3/4 cup onion, chopped (1 large)
 2/3 cup green pepper, chopped (about 1/2 a pepper)
 2 tablespoons canola oil
 1 14-ounce can of chicken broth
 2 cups water
 1 large potato, peeled and cubed
 5 teaspoons flour
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
 1 2/3 cups milk
 Dash of cayenne pepper (optional)
 4 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled (optional)
 Ciabatta bread
 1 cup shredded cheese

Directions:

1. In a large pot, cook onion and green pepper in canola oil until vegetables are tender. Add chicken broth, water and potato. Bring ingredients to a boil, then reduce heat to a simmer for 10 minutes with pot covered.
2. After 10 minutes, add corn and simmer, covered, another 10 minutes until potatoes are cooked through.
3. Meanwhile, in a small bowl combine flour, salt, black pepper and garlic powder. Whisk the milk into the flour mixture and add to pot. Stir milk into corn soup mixture until it is slightly thickened. If you enjoy a little kick to your chowder, add a dash or two of cayenne pepper to the pot. If desired, add crumbled bacon right into the soup.
4. If you want to have ciabatta bread with your soup, turn on your oven's broiler. Sprinkle cheese on sliced ciabatta bread. Toast bread for one to two minutes until it is crisp and golden brown.



"Healthy" resolutions redefined

As holiday superlatives go, New Year's Eve easily qualifies as 'Most Pretentious.' The night is a big sham of fabricated excitement leading up to an anticlimactic tick of the clock. Still, as holiday sentiments go, the fresh outlook of the next morning can't be beat.

The 'get healthy' resolution dominates many people's lists as the year turns, as it most likely will the next year, and the year after that and so on down the line until they become a) Lance Armstrong, b) resign themselves to sedentary lifestyles filled with Ben and Jerry's and 'Pete and Pete' reruns, which actually sounds wonderful, or c) die.

But health can be about more than marathons, 100-calorie snacks and \$200 running shoes.

I'm grounding my 2009 resolutions on the philosophizing of Bon Iver, the band of a heartbroken, reclusive folksinger. In the song "Skinny Love," he sings (or rather sobs as he addresses an anonymous ex-love), 'I told you to be patient / I told you to be fine / I told you to be balanced / I told you to be kind.' Thanks for the advice! Of course, Jesus could have told me as much about patience and kindness, and Taoism has a lot to say about balance with the whole yin and yang thing, but this guy plays guitar.

Point being, so much of the focus on health falls on the term's corporal connotations, which are important, but ultimately meaningless if they aren't accompanied with internal well-being, including mushy stuff like self-esteem, appreciation and passion, as well as practical (still mushy) stuff like cultivating friendships or even quirky (not mushy, just odd) stuff like raising plants or seeing a great band in concert three nights in a row. Guilty.

The problem with realizing this other aspect of health is that for the most part it's intangible. I make a conscious decision to eat an apple. Can I make a conscious decision to be happy? Maybe not. However, I've been experimenting with the idea that happiness might be built on the introduction of healthy mental habits and limitation of negative psychological vices-junk food for the brain. I aim, in a completely non-professional way, to explore these ideas, with a caveat that my authority on the subject is non-existent.

A first project in this alternative-health resolution involves making peace with the idea of autonomy over personal well-being. For 20-something years, we college students have been on quests for outside approval from parents, teachers and peers, relying on others'

affirmations for self-worth. We want A's, we want compliments, we want to feel special or we want special attention from that special someone.

My sister once worked at a preschool and mediated a conflict between two young students. The child who had been wronged told of her classmates that all could be forgiven. "Tell me I'm cute!" she insisted. My 23-year-old sister seeks similar confirmations from me before going out.

Relax, kids. We're all cute, smart, creative, needed and interesting. And by telling myself that, and believing it, I can accept both its truth and the sincerity of the source. I am living in my skin. Learning to embrace treasured personal qualities myself means compliments still feel great, but they no longer dictate self-esteem.

I know this comes across as feel-good, preachy crap à la Mr. Rogers. And it kind of is. Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt in the movie "Fight Club") can't stop laughing. But it's something to think about, and I haven't had a bad day in months (although a friend pointed out that this sounds like a headline from "The Onion").

So, and I say this without any irony: Happy 2009.

Peace
mind



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