




Soup Night Slapdashery

HOSPITALITY FOR BIG CROWDS
MADE SIMPLE

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MOSCOW, IDAHO



For my amazing mother,
who has fed delicious food
to ridiculously huge numbers of people
for as long as I can remember
and is in every way an inspiration.

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21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	1
Supply Cupboard	9
Logistics	14

BIG CROWD SOUP RECIPES


White Chicken Chili	22
Chorizo Lentil Soup	24
Green Chile Chicken Soup	26
Cheesy Ham and Potato Soup	28
Zuppa Toscana	30
Chicken, Bacon and Wild Rice Soup	32
Chicken Gnocchi Soup	34
Chili	36

BIG CROWD NON-SOUP RECIPES

Rice for the Masses	40
Coronation Chicken	42
Terribly Inauthentic Chicken Tikka Masala	44
Grandma Bessie's Mac and Cheese	46

SOUP NIGHT EXTRAS

Soup Night Bread	50
Honey Butter	53



Cinnamon Rolls	54
Chocolate Chip Cookies	56

REGULAR BATCH RECIPES

White Chicken Chili	60
Chorizo Lentil Soup	62
Green Chile Chicken Soup	64
Cheesy Ham and Potato Soup	66
Zuppa Toscana	68
Chicken, Bacon and Wild Rice Soup	70
Chicken Gnocchi Soup	72
Chili	74
Coronation Chicken	76
Terribly Inauthentic Chicken Tikka Masala	78
Grandma Bessie's Mac and Cheese	80

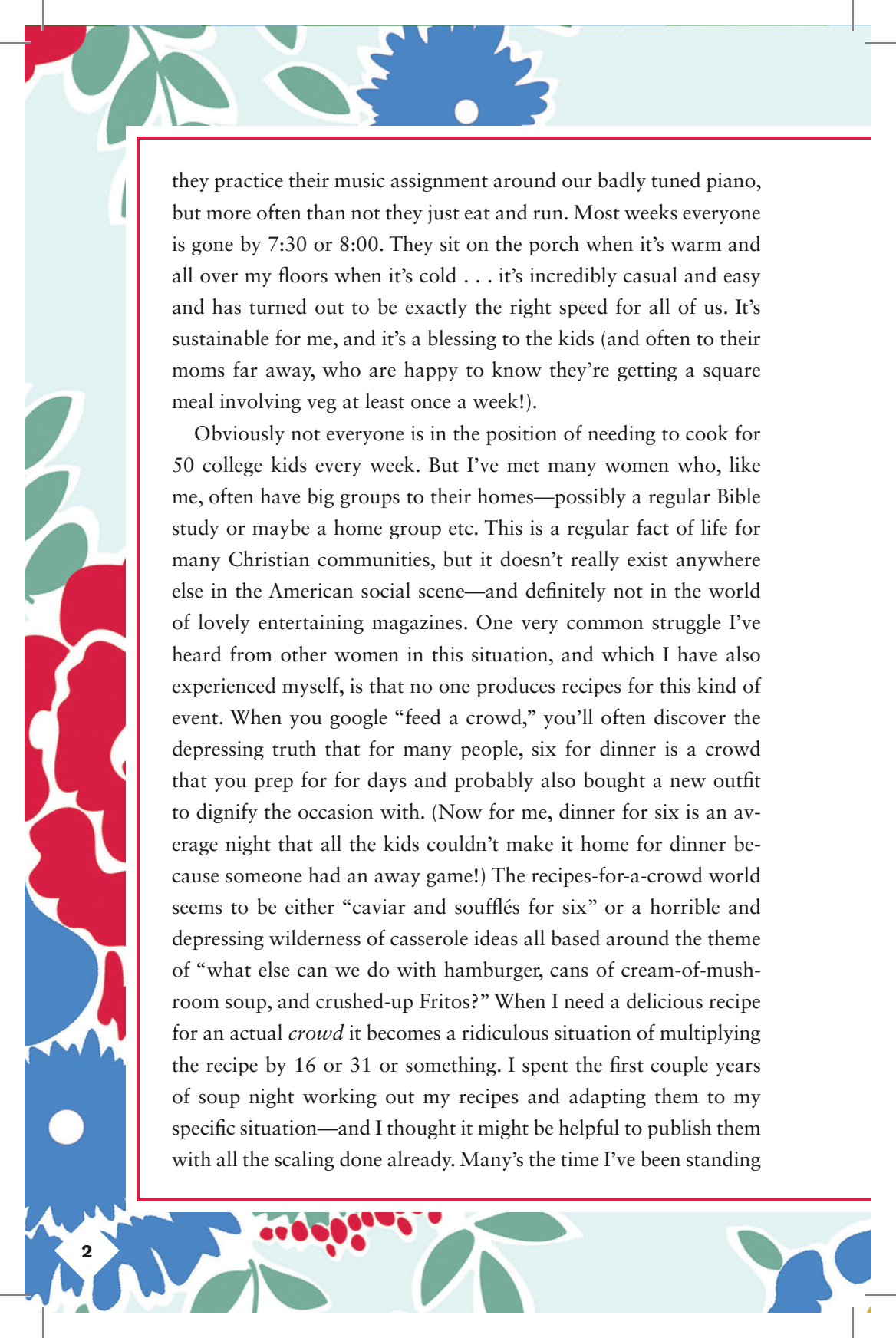


Introduction

Soup Night has rather hilariously slipped into being something of an institution in our family. It started as a random, skinny-branches kind of idea about four years ago and very shortly took on a life of its own.


My husband is the president of New Saint Andrews College, a small Christian liberal arts college in north Idaho. It is small by design, and the freshman class has been roughly 50 students. Being the president's wife means that I'm often involved in putting together larger events, but part of the vision of the school is that we want the students to really get to know their instructors and spend time in their homes. Since my husband is the president, our family attempts to have every student in the college to our house for a meal once during the school year, but I also wanted to put more focused effort into the freshmen since for many of them it's their first year away from home. I had toyed with various versions of small dinner parties every Friday, inviting only 10 or so per week. But that got convoluted very quickly since open Fridays are hard to come by, and not everyone can come, and then you forget who you had last time and who still needs to be invited. (And making college freshmen RSVP is a whole situation in itself!)

So I switched gears and decided to just offer an open invitation to the whole freshman class on Tuesday nights every week throughout the school year. Every Tuesday I make a huge pot of soup and a load of bread and aim to have it all hot at 6:00, just after my husband finishes delivering a lecture to them. Everyone rolls in, they have some soup, they chat for a while, maybe follow up on questions from class; sometimes they bring something to study, sometimes



they practice their music assignment around our badly tuned piano, but more often than not they just eat and run. Most weeks everyone is gone by 7:30 or 8:00. They sit on the porch when it's warm and all over my floors when it's cold . . . it's incredibly casual and easy and has turned out to be exactly the right speed for all of us. It's sustainable for me, and it's a blessing to the kids (and often to their moms far away, who are happy to know they're getting a square meal involving veg at least once a week!).

Obviously not everyone is in the position of needing to cook for 50 college kids every week. But I've met many women who, like me, often have big groups to their homes—possibly a regular Bible study or maybe a home group etc. This is a regular fact of life for many Christian communities, but it doesn't really exist anywhere else in the American social scene—and definitely not in the world of lovely entertaining magazines. One very common struggle I've heard from other women in this situation, and which I have also experienced myself, is that no one produces recipes for this kind of event. When you google “feed a crowd,” you'll often discover the depressing truth that for many people, six for dinner is a crowd that you prep for for days and probably also bought a new outfit to dignify the occasion with. (Now for me, dinner for six is an average night that all the kids couldn't make it home for dinner because someone had an away game!) The recipes-for-a-crowd world seems to be either “caviar and soufflés for six” or a horrible and depressing wilderness of casserole ideas all based around the theme of “what else can we do with hamburger, cans of cream-of-mushroom soup, and crushed-up Fritos?” When I need a delicious recipe for an actual *crowd* it becomes a ridiculous situation of multiplying the recipe by 16 or 31 or something. I spent the first couple years of soup night working out my recipes and adapting them to my specific situation—and I thought it might be helpful to publish them with all the scaling done already. Many's the time I've been standing



there in the grocery aisle with the guest-arrival moment rapidly approaching, trying to multiply $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. by 17 and then translate that to tablespoons, and then googling how that corresponds to ounces so I can decide how many jars of coriander I need to buy—and I thought it would be handy if all that work was already done for you in case you too are trying to feed an actual crowd!

Why soup? The one thing I knew when I was contemplating starting this event was that if I was going to make this happen every week it had to be sustainable. And for me that meant serving dinner out of one big pot. I don't have to wash millions of casserole pans at the end of the evening—just one pot. And while in my normal cooking I can occasionally become a bit of a snob about prepping and ingredients, for soup night I'm all about cutting corners. Frozen chopped onions and squeeze tubes of ginger, here we come!

However. There was one complication with soup that definitely needed to be factored in. My husband is, I think, fairly representative of your average meat-and-potatoes-loving male, and he has long felt that soup is not a meal. He thinks of it as a side dish—tasty, but not filling enough to count as the main course. Now I, on the other hand, am not going to go to the bother of making soup if I then have to also still cook a main dish. This has resulted in me putting a lot of effort into creating soups that are *filling*. And especially for a crowd of college boys, I know that a clear broth or a nice tomato bisque will not cut it—croutons or not. For a ladies' luncheon, those croutons might have just blown everyone's diet right out the window, but for 18-year-olds who have nothing but ramen in their cupboards and who probably haven't eaten since rugby practice, I have to major on meat, pasta, beans, etc. So it's important to note that each of these recipes has actually passed my husband's test and is filling enough to “count” as a real meal!

What does a typical soup night look like? At the beginning of this project, I took a trip to the restaurant supply store in a nearby

city, and I highly recommend it. As I said, my qualification for doing this every week is that it has to be sustainable for me—and that means (along with one pot) disposable dishes. I wouldn't normally serve guests on paper, but if soup night is going to continue to happen then it definitely needs to be disposable to make clean-up feasible on a weeknight when we all have school the next day. Now I don't know if you've ever tried to eat soup out of a regular plastic bowl, but it's entirely too easy to slosh and spill if you're carrying it around looking for a place to sit. And one of the things I would love would be to not have a skim coat of soup over all my furniture. So at the restaurant supply I bought a pile of those little flat-bottomed red plastic baskets that you line with a square sheet of parchment—the kind you'd probably be served fish and chips in—as well as disposable paper soup cups that sit sturdily in the basket. The cups have high flat sides and make spills less inevitable, and they take up less room in the basket, which leaves space on the side for the bread. I have a cabinet where I stash all my baskets and soup cups and parchment sheets during the week—and then on Tuesday afternoon I pull them out and make a stack of baskets that I pre-line with paper. I pile them all up on a tray next to a stack of paper soup cups, a stack of napkins, and a crock of plastic spoons. Getting that all out and set up takes roughly 7 minutes . . . like I said, sustainable!

While I do love the idea of being an incredibly organized human, it turns out that I'm not. In my dreams I have done all the shopping and cleaning and organizing for soup night days in advance—but the truth is, I never start getting ready until 1:30 on Tuesday, and that's because I'm a teacher and my last class ends at 1:30. For the first few years, I would literally leave school and go to the grocery store, often sitting in the parking lot before going in, trying to decide what soup to make. But as I settled on soups that were best suited for this event, I gradually relaxed into to a set of favorite,



Supply Cupboard

WHAT TO HAVE IN YOUR KITCHEN

If you're undertaking the kind of regular event that I'm talking about, here is a list of supplies that I have found invaluable.

- **6-gallon soup pot:** This is really a *sine qua non*. The scale of these recipes will overflow any normal household size container you have. I bought my trusty pot at Costco, but a restaurant supply store will carry this as well.
- **Long-handled ladle that hooks over the edge of the pot:** I found mine incredibly cheap at the restaurant supply store.
- **Wooden spoon:** For two years, I made soup with a regular wooden spoon, but then a lovely friend gave me a custom-made gift that she sourced from Etsy. It's custom made by DJ Remington, and when I told her about this cookbook, she very fantastically agreed to make this ever-so-fabulous spoon available to the rest of you! So go to her shop at etsy.com/shop/FortRemington, and search for the Slapdashery Soup Spoon, and you'll be in business. I can't tell you how much I love this spoon of mine. It's just a lovely and gratifying spoon to stir soup with. It has a huge long handle, so you don't end up burning your knuckles as you try to keep the bottom from scorching, and you don't keep losing it in the depths of the pot.
- **Tiny tongs:** I have a few pairs of these, and they come in very handy when you're serving toppings with the soup. They grab shredded cheese or chopped cilantro or a lime wedge and don't take up much room in your drawer. I bought mine at Walmart years ago.

Logistics

COST

A dinner for 50 students costs roughly \$100–125 per week, give or take. Obviously this depends on where you shop and the specific recipe, but that's the average week for me. This includes all the food and beverages, but since I buy a huge amount of the disposables all at once and save them from week to week, that's a separate price tag.

TIMELINE

In theory you should be able to pull off dinner for 50 without too much drama even if you're only collecting the groceries *after* you've spent the morning at the dentist and then joined friends for a nice long birthday luncheon. The first few weeks will probably take you a bit longer, but after you settle into a routine you'll be surprised at how feasible this actually is.

THE NIGHT BEFORE

Choose soup, and book groceries.

THE DAY OF

- 1:30—Pick up groceries.
- 2:00—Mix bread dough.
- 2:30—All bread dough is rising.
- 2:30—Begin soup.
- 3:45—Shape loaves, and place on baking sheets to rise.



Big Crowd Soup Recipes

White Chicken Chili

SERVES 50 GLUTEN-FREE GF

This recipe began its career as someone's favorite family recipe that was published in Taste of Home magazine. I made it a few times for our family, to great acclaim, and it later got tweaked and absorbed and adapted into this soup for a crowd. I've streamlined the ingredients and the process to optimize speed but hopefully keep the crowd-pleasing flavor.

INGREDIENTS

- 10 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken breasts (roughly 12–14 breasts)
- ½ c. vegetable oil
- 9 (10-oz.) bags of frozen, chopped onions (or chop 9 medium yellow onions)
- 5 Tbsp. garlic powder
- 18 (15-oz.) cans white northern beans, drained and rinsed
- 10 (7-oz.) cans green chiles, drained
- 3 Tbsp. kosher salt
- 3 Tbsp. cumin
- 3 Tbsp. oregano
- 1 Tbsp. + 1½ tsp. ground black pepper
- 2¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
- 18 c. chicken broth
- 9 c. sour cream (One 48-oz. lb. tub of sour cream plus two 16-oz. tubs comes out just about perfect—I dump all three tubs in and don't bother to measure it.)
- 1 qt. whipping cream (4 c.)