Perfecting Egg-Lemon Soup

Just the right combination of four common ingredients makes an exceptional soup.

BY ADAM RIED WITH JULIA COLLIN

American mothers, Jewish or otherwise, have not cornered the world market on chicken soup. Greek mothers, for instance, regularly transform four simple ingredients—chicken stock, rice, eggs, and lemon—into a surprisingly elegant, deeply satisfying soup called *avgolemono*. For those who have never encountered it, this egg-lemon soup is the essence of simple home cooking, based on ingredients as common in American pantries as they are in Greek ones. Flavorful chicken stock is simmered with rice, accented with lemon, and thickened to a suave, creamy consistency and golden hue with beaten eggs. Season simply with a little salt, and you have a soup as fit to start a fancy holiday meal as it is to comfort a flu or soothe frayed winter nerves. For these reasons alone, egg-lemon soup is worth incorporating into your culinary repertoire.

Straightforward though it is, there are issues to investigate with egg-lemon soup. First, the texture must be rich and soft, not thin or frothy or pasty, all of which it sometimes is. Also, the soup should be free of tough bits of cooked egg, which would mar its luxurious texture. Finally, you want a full, lemony flavor—more than just acidity—to balance the savory flavor of the stock.

For a Turkish-style garnish, mix 2 teaspoons sweet paprika and 3 tablespoons melted butter, then swirl a bit on the surface of each serving.

Fine-Tuning Texture

That eggs are responsible for the smooth texture of this soup was one of only two points of accord found in all of the recipes we researched, which originated not only in Greece but also in Middle Eastern and North African countries, where versions of this soup are also part of the national cuisine. There was considerable debate, however, over the number of eggs, whether to use them whole or separated, whether to whip separated whites to a foam, how long to beat the yolks, and whether to beat them by hand or with a blender or food processor.

Initial tests based on two quarts of stock and two eggs demonstrated that whole eggs produced better body than yolks alone but that the yolks produced a superior flavor. At the same time, we ruled out separating the eggs and whipping the whites, as well as using a machine to beat yolks or whole eggs, because both led to soups that were unappealingly foamy and aerated, with weak body and a pale color. The two-egg soup was a little too thin for us, though, so from there we tinkered with different numbers of eggs and extra yolks until we finally settled on two whole eggs plus two yolks as the foundation of our ideal texture and color.

Next we had to ponder even finer points concerning the eggs. First was their temperature. Some recipes warned that the eggs must be at room temperature if they are to marry successfully with the stock. While we had absolutely no problem thickening the soup with eggs right out of the refrigerator, we did find that eggs that sat unchilled for 15 or 20 minutes yielded a marginally smoother soup. The upshot? If you remember, remove the eggs from the refrigerator a few minutes ahead of time, but don't give it a second thought if you forget. Likewise, several recipes insisted on beating the eggs for up to five minutes before introducing the stock, but we found this extra effort unwarranted. Not only was it harder to do than beating them lightly and quickly, but it created undesirable foam and faded the color of the soup. Like whipping the eggs in a machine, longer beating added too much air.

Think Thick

In classic French cooking, any agent used to thicken or bind a soup, sauce, or stew is called a *liaison*. Common liaisons include flour, starch, roux, cream, the butter-flour mixture called *beurre manié*, and, as in the case of egg-lemon soup, eggs and yolks. The method used to introduce the liaison into the stock was the second point of agreement in the recipes we researched. Known as *tempering*, this process consists of first beating the eggs lightly and then slowly beating in some of the hot stock. This mixture is then added to the remaining hot stock to finish the soup. The effect of tempering is to elevate the temperature of the eggs gradually so that they don't seize up and form curds in the soup.

According to Elisa Maloberti, a test kitchen representative from the American Egg Board in Park Ridge, Ill., the added stock dilutes the eggs, with the extra water molecules in effect separating the protein molecules. The protein molecules then have to move faster to find each other and link up, or coagulate, thus raising the temperature at which coagulation occurs. Just to cover all the bases, we tried skipping the tempering process. Sure enough, we produced chunks of scrambled eggs floating in watery soup. Eggs normally coagulate at roughly 150 degrees Fahrenheit, and simmering stock can approach 200 degrees.

One recipe, however, offered a variation on the tempering technique. Rather than adding the stock to the eggs in a thin stream, this recipe called for dumping the stock into the eggs, just as long as it was added in small portions. So we tried it, adding one-half cup of stock at a time. The eggs didn't curdle, but the texture of the soup did suffer a little bit. The smoothest soups resulted from the tried-and-true method of trickling the stock in gradually.

The rice cooked in the stock also plays a minor role in the thickening process. Shirley Corriher, author of *Cookwise* (William Morrow, 1997) and a *Cooks'* food science advisor, explained that the rice leaches some of its starch into the stock as the grains swell and cook. Those loose starch molecules act to slightly increase the coagulation temperature of the eggs by becoming part of the network of denatured proteins that join together to do the work of thickening. The presence of

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

the starch in the protein network also provides some buffer against curdling the eggs should the soup overheat during the final cooking process. So, in a sense, the rice helps to stabilize the entire mixture.

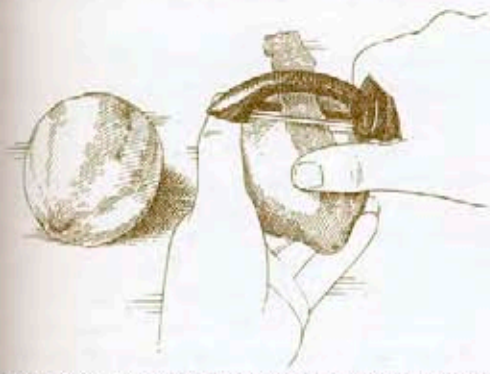
With the texture just where we wanted it, we turned our attention to the flavor. In most of the soups we'd made so far, the lemon flavor was fleeting. It came and went on the palate in almost the same instant. We tried various amounts of lemon juice, but adding more than one-quarter cup made the soup taste harsh. Extra acidity was not the answer here. Though none of the recipes we consulted had mentioned it, we tried adding lemon zest—the yellow outermost part of the peel—to the equation. The addition of zest from 1½ lemons, simmered in the stock with the rice, was a stunning success, giving the soup a refreshing tang and full lemon resonance. This flavor stayed with us. Adding bay leaves and a trace amount of spice to the stock brought even greater depth of flavor. Cardamom, in particular, added a real finesse.

With so few ingredients, the stock plays the leading role when it comes to the flavor of egg-lemon soup. That's why we were sadly disappointed with soup made from canned low-sodium chicken broth. "Weak and tinny" was the consensus of our tasters. There's no question that the very best egg-lemon soup is made with a robust, homemade stock. While making stock is not difficult, it is time-consuming, so we were lucky to have the details of a quick chicken stock worked out by Pam Anderson in her March/April 1996 story "Quick Homemade Chicken Soup." A traditional long-cooked stock can simmer for up to five hours, but the version in the recipe below can be completed in less than one hour, and the flavor is excellent.

GREEK EGG-LEMON SOUP (AVGOLEMONO)

MAKES ABOUT 8 CUPS, SERVING 6 TO 8

Homemade chicken stock gives this soup the best flavor and body; in a pinch, use low-sodium canned chicken broth. The longer the final soup cooks after the eggs have been added, the thicker it becomes. About 5 minutes of heating produces a soft, velvety texture; any longer and the soup begins to turn pasty. Scallions and fresh mint, individually or together, make simple and flavorful garnishes. Serve the soup immediately; it thickens to a gravylike consistency when reheated.



Large Strips of Zest Run a vegetable peeler from pole to pole to remove long, wide strips of zest.

ILLUSTRATION: ALAN WITSCHONKE; JOHN BURGOYNE

- 2 quarts chicken stock, preferably homemade (see recipe at right)
- ½ cup long-grain white rice
- 1 bay leaf
- 4 green cardamom pods, crushed, or 2 whole cloves
- Zest strips from 1½ medium lemons (about 12 1-inch x 4-inch pieces); see illustration, below left
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 2 large eggs, plus 2 yolks, preferably at room temperature
- ¼ cup juice from zested lemons
- 1 large scallion, sliced thin, and/or 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint leaves

1. Bring chicken stock to boil in medium nonreactive saucepan over high heat. Add rice, bay leaf, cloves or cardamom, lemon zest, and salt; reduce heat to medium and simmer until rice is tender and stock is aromatic from lemon zest, 16 to 20 minutes. With slotted spoon, remove and discard bay leaf, cloves or cardamom, and zest strips; increase heat to high and return stock to boil, then reduce heat to low.

2. Whisk eggs, yolks, and lemon juice lightly in medium nonreactive bowl until combined. Whisking constantly, slowly ladle about 2 cups hot stock into egg mixture; whisk until combined. Pour egg-stock mixture back into saucepan; cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until soup is slightly thickened and wisps of steam appear, 4 to 5 minutes. Do not simmer or boil. Divide soup among serving bowls, sprinkle with scallion and/or mint; serve immediately.

EGG-LEMON SOUP WITH CINNAMON AND CAYENNE

This variation, the test kitchen favorite, is based on a Tunisian-style egg-lemon soup detailed in Mimi Sheraton's *The Whole World Loves Chicken Soup* (Warner Books, 1995).

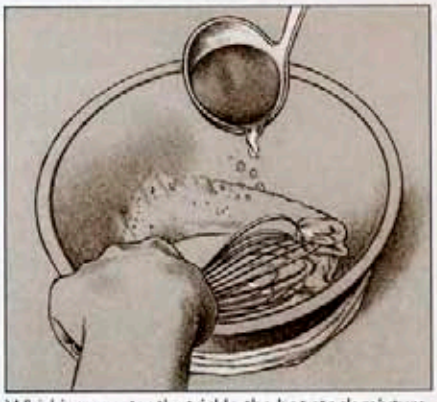
Follow recipe for Greek Egg-Lemon Soup, substituting one 2-inch stick cinnamon and a pinch of cayenne for cloves or cardamom.

EGG-LEMON SOUP WITH SAFFRON

Follow recipe for Greek Egg-Lemon Soup, adding a pinch (about ¼ teaspoon) saffron threads, crushed between fingertips, to stock along with rice, bay leaf, cloves or cardamom, salt, and zest.

TECHNIQUE

TEMPERING THE EGGS



Whisking constantly, trickle the hot stock mixture into the beaten eggs with a ladle.

EGG-LEMON SOUP WITH CHICKEN

Follow recipe for Greek Egg-Lemon Soup, Egg-Lemon Soup with Cinnamon and Cayenne, or Egg-Lemon Soup with Saffron, adding two boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 12 ounces total) cut into ½-inch cubes to stock along with rice, seasonings, and zest.

QUICK HOMEMADE CHICKEN STOCK

MAKES ABOUT 2 QUARTS

If chicken necks and backs are not available at your market, substitute chicken wings. A cleaver is best for hacking the chicken parts, though a heavy chef's knife will also do.

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped medium
- 4 pounds chicken backs and necks, hacked with cleaver into 2-inch pieces
- 2 quarts boiling water
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 bay leaves

1. Heat oil in large stockpot over medium-high heat until shimmering; add onion and sauté until softened slightly, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer onion to large bowl. Add half of chicken pieces to pot; sauté until no longer pink, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer cooked chicken to bowl with onion. Repeat with remaining chicken pieces. Return onion and chicken pieces to pot. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook until chicken releases its juices, about 20 minutes. Increase heat to high; add boiling water, salt, and bay leaves. Return to simmer, reduce heat to medium-low, then cover and barely simmer until broth is rich and flavorful, about 20 minutes.

2. Strain broth and discard solids. Spoon off fat and discard. (Stock can be covered and refrigerated up to 2 days or frozen for several months.)