



on the side

THIS IS NOT YOUR GRANNY'S ASPIC

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE

Boil the bones slowly.
Strain, flavor, mold and garnish.
Voila! It's aspic!

Aspic Haiku by Carol Penn-Romine

Recently I helped assemble a cookbook at church and spent a few hours combing through preceding decades of its recipe collections for entries to include in a spirit of embracing the past. I was astonished by the number of aspics I found, yet unsurprised by how little appeal any of them held. After all, just how many ways can you make a suspension of canned chicken, boiled eggs and green peas sound attractive? I selected one to include, not because I thought anyone would want to make it, but because it was the most amusing relic of its era. Then, while I was still feeling smug and superior on the subject, *Edible Memphis* issued the call: Want to write a piece on aspic? Ah, payback for looking down my nose at a food with a distinguished history reaching back far beyond the perky, resourceful image of the housewife in the 50s-era women's magazines.

To most people, aspic is as out of date as a fondue stain on a leisure suit. What was considered a hallmark of the chic dinner table in the mid-twentieth century soon became a gelatinized punch line as it was edged off the menu by quiche, niçoise and other French, or at least French-sounding, dishes. Aspic's image problem goes beyond fashion, however. You may recall the scene in *Julie & Julia*, with Julie's supportive husband brandishing a calf's foot, Julie boiling said foot, then failing miserably at producing a decent molded aspic from it. In fact, what splurged out of the mold and off the plate would make an excellent appetite suppressant.

When I mentioned this assignment to my husband, who had just watched the movie, the U.S. Geological Survey registered his shudder on their earthquake recording instruments, sending the general populace scurrying into safe places and clambering for their stashes of purified water and canned food. As my spouse, he's required to test drive whatever I make while writing food articles, so his reluctance is certainly understandable. He still contends that there was nothing in our marriage vows about "in yummy food and in icky," so my personal goal was not simply to make a dish that satisfied the requirement for aspic, but to make one about which he would say, "Let's add that to the rotation," which is the file of dishes from which we cook regular meals. I'm happy to report that he loves both of the aspics I've devised for this story.

What we think of as aspic these days is a relatively recent invention. In fact, the word "aspic" is thought to have derived from the ancient Greek word for "shield." Appropriate, considering a layer of highly concentrated gelatin is a standard component of bulletproof clothing. Fancy that!

In a pre-ziplock and resealable food container world, aspic wasn't a food but rather a squidgy jacket for food, used to seal it, both protecting it from bacterial growth and preventing it from drying out. This, of course, makes unsnarling a sheet of plastic wrap seem not so bad. The venerable *Larousse Gastronomique* devotes several pages to

CLASSIC ASPIC

By Carol Penn-Romine

Makes about 8 half-cup servings

- 3 envelopes unflavored gelatin (¾ oz. total)
- ¼ cup water
- 1 quart tomato juice
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon grated onion
- ½ tablespoon finely ground sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste

Combine water and gelatin in a small saucepan, stir and set aside.

Coat a 1-quart mold or 8 half-cup ramekins lightly with non-stick spray and set aside.

In a metal bowl combine tomato juice, lemon juice, vinegar, onion, salt and cayenne. Set the bowl over a sauce pan with about a half-inch of water in it, place on stove and turn heat on low, so that the mixture heats but does not cook (this prevents the gelatin from clumping when it is stirred in).

Place saucepan with gelatin over low heat and allow the mixture to melt. Slowly stir the melted gelatin into the warmed juice mixture and mix well. Pour into mold(s), let cool and refrigerate until set, two to four hours.

To unmold, briefly dip the bottom of the mold in a bowl of warm water, then turn it over to unmold the aspic on a bed of lettuce leaves. Garnish with crème fraîche and a sprinkling of chopped chives.

Note: Crème fraîche is one of those unsung work horses of the kitchen. If you don't know how to make it, you should! A wonderfully flavorful and subtly tangy topping, it's also perfect for adding creaminess to soups and sauces because it doesn't curdle when you cook with it.

To make your own, just pour a cup of heavy cream into a glass container and stir in 2 tablespoons of buttermilk. Cover the mixture and let it sit at room temperature anywhere from eight hours to overnight, until it's thickened to your liking. Stir well, cover and refrigerate. Homemade crème fraîche keeps for about 10 days, if you don't eat it all first!

the production and use of aspic, including the coating of everything from pheasant to frogs' legs, from lobster to foie gras.

Alternately, aspic was used to bind together bits of food into terrines, just one of the many ways in which our forebears were resourceful with their meager assets and charged with making every scrap of food count in those waste-nothing days. Although there's no milk product in it, this is where "head cheese" comes from, or *fromage de tête*, which sounds so much more appealing, don't you think?

Today, there's no need for boiling bones or straining and clarifying. Commercially produced unflavored gelatin has removed the most difficult part of creating aspic. Just whip out those nifty little packets and you're set to focus on flavor. While it's fun to occasionally take a whack at making something complicated from scratch, producing your own gelatin involves an enormous investment of time and energy, not to mention ingredients that are difficult to find at the grocery these days. So don't feel like a cheat if you use the store-bought version. (An important note: Be sure if you wash any gelatin down the drain that you run through plenty of hot water. That is, unless you yearn to put your plumber's kids through college.)

An aspic can be as basic as a simple tomato-based one or as fussy as one loaded with chunks of lobster or crabmeat, vegetables and other tasty bits. But the key to a good aspic is making sure that the flavor is well balanced. The tongue registers flavor — and the lack of it — more readily in cold food than in hot, so this is no time to hide the saltshaker or skimp on the flavorings. Gelatinized blandness is a recipe for disaster, or at least for uneaten aspic. So taste, adjust the seasonings, and then taste again as you go.

That said, when creating an aspic, you're limited only by your imagination. And let's don't call it aspic anymore. Let's call it what the French do: *gelée*. There, doesn't that sound better already? *eM*

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Alternatives to Gelatin

If you're vegetarian, you can skirt the gelatin issue by substituting isinglass, which comes from the swim bladder of fish. Or, if you're vegan, use agar agar. Keep in mind that the consistency of a dish made with these substitutes will be different from the same thing made with gelatin. After all, it's an entirely different animal, er, non-animal, but they are good options if you don't want to use gelatin.

GAZPACHO ASPIC

By Carol Penn-Romine

Makes 12 half-cup servings

3 cups tomato juice
½ cup cucumber, peeled, seeded, finely chopped
½ cup celery, finely chopped
¼ cup red bell pepper, veined, seeded, finely chopped
¼ cup green bell pepper, veined, seeded, finely chopped
½ cup red onion, minced
¼ cup scallions, minced
1 jalapeño, veined, seeded and minced
1 tablespoon cilantro, finely chopped
½ teaspoon garlic, minced
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
2 teaspoons sherry vinegar
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste
3 envelopes unflavored gelatin

Lightly coat 12 half-cup molds (or one large bowl or gelatin mold) with non-stick spray and set aside. In a large metal bowl combine 1½ cups tomato juice, cucumber, celery, red and green bell peppers, red onion, scallions, jalapeño, cilantro, garlic, lime juice, sherry vinegar, salt and cayenne, and stir well to combine.

Place bowl with mixture over a pan containing a small amount of water on low heat, not to cook the mixture but to warm it, so that the gelatin doesn't clump up when added.

In a small bowl pour ¾ cup tomato juice over the gelatin. Stir and let sit for five minutes. Place the remaining ¾ cup tomato juice in a small saucepan, heat just to boiling, then pour over gelatin mixture. Stir until gelatin is completely melted and no lumps remain. Pour into warm gazpacho mixture, and stir well to combine.

Fill the molds and refrigerate until thoroughly set, three to six hours. To unmold, quickly dip the molds into hot water. Serve individual aspics on a lettuce leaf and garnish with crème fraîche (see recipe on previous page).

