

Tuscan White Bean and Escarole Soup

Acquacotta transforms humble ingredients into a supremely satisfying meal.

BY LAN LAM

Don't let the name *acquacotta*, meaning "cooked water" in Italian, deceive you. In this Tuscan soup, a cousin of the better-known minestrone and *ribbolita*, water, vegetables, beans, and herbs are transformed into a rustic meal when whole eggs or yolks are whisked into the broth before it's ladled over stale bread, which is often first topped with a poached egg.

Though its name references water, many modern recipes for this soup call for broth. No matter which liquid is used, the soup is usually bolstered with *soffritto*: sautéed minced onion, celery, and garlic. From there, recipes vary wildly. To choose between chicken broth and water, I made two batches of *soffritto* and added broth to one and water to the other. I also added fennel, for its anise notes, and bitter escarole, which seems delicate but holds up well when cooked. Canned tomatoes contributed acidity, canned cannellini beans brought heartiness, and a Pecorino rind lent salty savoriness. Tasters preferred the broth-based soup, though it still tasted somewhat lean.

That's because I had yet to add the egg. Most recipes call for stirring raw eggs or yolks directly into the soup, but curdling is always a risk. Would diluting the egg proteins with liquid make it harder for them to link up and form firm clumps when heated? I whisked two yolks into the canning liquid from the beans, which was already pretty viscous; this mixture thickened the broth beautifully.

I sprinkled in lots of parsley and oregano for freshness and, taking a cue from thrifty Italian

cooks, added the sweet fronds from the fennel bulb. Finally, with no stale bread on hand, I toasted a few slices under the broiler and placed each slice in a bowl. Placing a poached egg on the toast before ladling in the soup made a more substantial meal. With a sprinkling of Pecorino and a spritz of lemon juice, this was a remarkably satisfying soup, all the more enjoyable for its frugal provenance.

TUSCAN WHITE BEAN AND ESCAROLE SOUP (ACQUACOTTA)

SERVES 8 TO 10

If escarole is unavailable, you can substitute 8 ounces of kale. We prefer Pecorino Romano's salty flavor, but Parmesan can be substituted, if desired. If your cheese has a rind, slice it off the wedge and add it to the pot with the broth in step 3 (remove it before serving). We like to serve this soup the traditional way, with a poached or soft-cooked egg spooned on top of the toast before the broth is ladled into the bowl.

Soup

- 1 large onion, chopped coarse
- 2 celery ribs, chopped coarse
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 8 cups chicken broth
- 1 fennel bulb, 2 tablespoons fronds minced, stalks discarded, bulb halved, cored, and cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 (15-ounce) cans cannellini beans, drained with liquid reserved, rinsed
- 1 small head escarole (10 ounces), trimmed and cut into ½-inch pieces (8 cups)
- 2 large egg yolks
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh oregano
- Grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- Lemon wedges

Toast

- 10 (½-inch-thick) slices thick-crust country bread
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

1. FOR THE SOUP: Pulse onion, celery, and garlic in food processor until very finely chopped, 15 to 20 pulses, scraping down sides of bowl as



Toasted bread makes the soup even heartier.

needed. Transfer onion mixture to Dutch oven. Add tomatoes and their juice to now-empty processor and pulse until tomatoes are finely chopped, 10 to 12 pulses; set aside.

2. Stir oil, ¾ teaspoon salt, and pepper flakes into onion mixture. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until light brown fond begins to form on bottom of pot, 12 to 15 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, increase heat to high, and cook, stirring frequently, until mixture is very thick and rubber spatula leaves distinct trail when dragged across bottom of pot, 9 to 12 minutes.

3. Add broth and fennel bulb to pot and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until fennel begins to soften, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in beans and escarole and cook until fennel is fully tender, about 10 minutes.

4. Whisk egg yolks and reserved bean liquid together in bowl, then stir into soup. Stir in parsley, oregano, and fennel fronds. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

5. FOR THE TOAST: Adjust oven rack about 5 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Place bread on aluminum foil-lined rimmed baking sheet, drizzle with oil, and season with salt and pepper. Broil until bread is deep golden brown.

6. Place 1 slice bread in bottom of each individual bowl. Ladle soup over toasted bread. Serve, passing Pecorino and lemon wedges separately.

Frugal Gourmet



Nothing is wasted in *acquacotta*: Ingredient scraps such as fennel fronds, canned bean liquid, and a Pecorino rind contribute robust flavor and a luxurious texture.



See the Soup Take Shape

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17