

LOVE SOUP

A warm new cookbook from Ojai author Anna Thomas shares the love.



ANNA THOMAS wrote *The Vegetarian Epicure* as a student at UCLA in the 1970s, elevating vegetarian food to gourmet status and enchanting home cooks with her chatty, personal approach to making fantastic fare that just happens to be meatless. Three decades later, with her sons away at college, the Ojai resident found herself downsizing out of the big family home—and its expansive kitchen. Awaiting the completion of some renovations to her new house, Thomas set up camp in an adjoining one-room artist's studio, and installed a modest 81-inch-wide Ikea kitchen intended to get her through what she thought would be a few months. When construction stretched out for years instead of months, Thomas found her style of cooking adapting to the “wee kitchen,” as she calls it, forcing her to think about what was essential.

“I didn’t want to stop cooking, stop eating well, stop having my friends over,” she says. “I found more and more that I was cooking soup: I was living the soup life, leaning on it as the central thing that would keep me going, making it possible to live in that space.”

The result of her three years spent entertaining with one-pot meals—in her one-room studio—is an inviting collection of

soup recipes, including some breads, salads, and sweets to round out the meal. Thomas’ *Love Soup* (Norton, 2009; www.norton.com) went on to win a coveted James Beard Award earlier this year in the “Healthy Focus” category—although the fact that her recipes are healthful wasn’t ever her focus.

“The way I cook now is inherently healthy,” says Thomas. “I use a lot of produce, and not nearly as much dairy as I used to.” In fact, when she took the time to analyze her own recipes before publishing, she realized that many of her soups weren’t only vegetarian but vegan as well. “It’s a good thing in terms of sustainability and health, and it’s a really good thing in terms of flavor. It made me realize how my cooking has shifted over the years,” she says.

While plenty of friends helped taste her soups along the way, the final retesting of Thomas’ recipes had her preparing massive amounts of soup—beyond what her inner circle could consume. That’s when a friend started taking pots of Thomas’ soup to Project Understanding, a nonprofit organization that serves the needy in Ventura (projectunderstanding.org). “I would call her and say, ‘I’ve got soup for you,’” says Thomas. “I got such beautiful notes from the people who ate it; it was very touching.”

So does the fact that a big pot of soup is so adept at spreading the love account for her *Love Soup* title? “It can be understood in different ways,” says Thomas. “We put a lot of love into our food when we cook at home; no matter how good restaurant cooking is, it never has that quality of personal communication the way home cooking does.” Or, as she writes in her book, “There is an old Spanish saying, much repeated: ‘Of love and soup, the second is better.’ But I say, why choose? Be in love. Eat soup. Love soup!”

ORGANIC SOUP KITCHEN

in Santa Barbara is preparing to serve 1,000 needy people Thanksgiving dinner later this month (complete with live music and gifts). And they’ll do it all over again next month for Christmas dinner. In addition to special holiday meals, the organization works hard year-round, serving the area’s homeless every Sunday: As many as 300 people show up each week for organic soup, as well as to enjoy access to health care through Doctors Without Walls (santabarbarastreetmedicine.org).

Organic Soup Kitchen was founded by executive director Anthony Carroccio just over a year ago. “These people are very fragile. Most of them have diabetes,” he says. “Nourishing food is a very medicinal thing for them. We like to feed people low-glycemic, anti-inflammatory food—and, of course, organic.”

As young as it is, the organization is already growing quickly to meet demand. It’s looking for a permanent home with a bigger kitchen (it currently operates out of the Veterans Memorial Building), and it’s debuting a culinary program for the unemployed, teaching food safety and other skills that build a good foundation for being a kitchen worker.

Organic Soup Kitchen needs volunteers as well as financial donations; visit organicsoupkitchen.org to learn more.



Ojai cookbook author Anna Thomas fell in love with soup after adjusting her cooking to fit in a tiny kitchen during house renovations; the delicious results are published in *Love Soup*.



IN THE KITCHEN

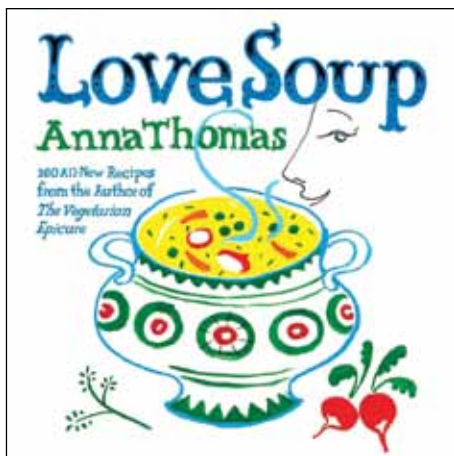
THE GREAT PUMPKIN SOUP

This recipe comes courtesy of Anna Thomas from her newest cookbook, Love Soup (Norton, 2009; wwnorton.com). On selecting the perfect pumpkin, Thomas writes, "I've had good luck with some smaller varieties; Sweet Mamas, sugar pumpkins, and baby Hubbards come to mind." She also points out that other winter squash, such as kabocha, buttercup, delicata, and butternut, will work, too. If possible, use homemade vegetable stock; otherwise, a purchased vegetable broth will do.

- ¾ cup dried cannellini or other white beans (5 ounces)
- 1½ teaspoons sea salt, plus more to taste
- 1 medium pumpkin, about 4 pounds untrimmed (2½ pounds trimmed)
- 2½ tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, coarsely chopped
- 8 ounces leeks, white and light-green parts
- 12 ounces Yukon Gold potatoes
- 4–5 cups any basic vegetable broth
- 12 ounces green chard
- ¾ cup packed cilantro or fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves
- 2–3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, plus more if needed
- 1–3 tablespoons brown sugar (dark or light)
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Nutmeg

Garnishes:

- Fruity green olive oil
- Crumbled feta or other fresh white cheese



Put the dried beans in a large soup pot or stockpot with 8 cups water, bring the water to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer the beans, covered, for at least an hour, or until they are tender. This may take up to 2 hours, depending on the age of the beans. Add more water if you need to in order to keep the beans covered. When the beans are soft, add a teaspoon of salt.

While the beans are cooking, prepare the pumpkin: split it in half, scrape out all the seeds and strings, and then cut the pumpkin into wide strips and peel off the hard skin. Do this last part carefully, using a sharp knife and pushing the blade away from you. Cut the trimmed pumpkin into 1½-inch cubes. You should have about 8 cups of cubed pumpkin.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Toss the pumpkin cubes with a tablespoon of olive oil and a generous sprinkle of salt and spread them on a baking sheet. Roast the pumpkin pieces for about 45 minutes, turning them once or twice, until they are tender and browned in spots.

Heat the remaining 1½ tablespoons olive oil in a nonstick skillet and gently sauté the chopped onion in it with a sprinkle of salt, over medium heat, until it softens and begins to color, about 10 minutes. Wash and thinly slice or chop the leeks, add them to the onion, and keep cooking until the leeks are also tender and browning, about another 15 minutes.

Scrub and trim the potatoes and cut them into ½-inch dice. Put the potatoes in a large soup pot with 2 cups water, 4 cups vegetable broth, and a pinch of salt. Bring the water to a boil, lower the heat, and simmer the potatoes for 6 or 7 minutes. Wash the chard, trim off the stems and coarsely chop the leaves, and add the chard to the potatoes.

Add the cooked onion and leeks, the roasted pumpkin, and the cilantro or parsley leaves to the pot and simmer the soup for 15 minutes. The pumpkin will become very soft, and some of it will fall apart, thickening the broth and imparting its lovely orangey-gold color.

Add the cooked cannellini with all their broth and taste the soup. Season it with lemon juice, a little brown sugar if the pumpkin is not very sweet, and a bit more sea salt to bring it all together. There should be a subtle sweet-tart balance, and the amount of lemon juice or sugar you need will vary with the type of pumpkin. Grind in a little black pepper and add a pinch of nutmeg.

Serve the soup hot, in deep bowls, with a last-minute drizzle of fruity, green olive oil and a sprinkle of crumbled cheese on top of each serving.

Serves 10 generously. ■



At the Market

Love Soup author Anna Thomas goes through a lot of fresh produce in creating her soups. Her favorite local place to shop is the **OJAI CERTIFIED FARMERS' MARKET** (ojacertifiedfarmersmarket.com). "It's gotten so good in the last few years," she says. "It has everything you need."

Thomas also draws ingredients and inspiration from a weekly basket of produce she gets from an **OJAI CSA** (Community Supported Agriculture, in which members purchase a share in a local farm, and then receive a share of its produce; to find one near you visit csafarming.com). "It's such good, fresh, lovely produce," she says, adding that never knowing what will be in the weekly basket inspires creativity. "It spurs you to do some experimenting, it's really fun."