

The Cook

Norbert Kovacs

I have been cooking the stew in this pot for as long as I can remember. I can't have done anything else since starting to make it, I'm certain. I stir the pot or feed meat and vegetables into it the entire day. I never leave this corner of the diner kitchen even at night; I sleep upright leaning against the wall after setting the stew to simmer on the stove. I wake to the sound of it bubbling which sets me cooking again. I must be a natural cook, I guess. I have never burned the stew the once. If I did, I'm sure the diner would get rid of me. I'm proud to think how well I do my job despite my failings. I am very nearsighted, for one. I see to the stove, the counter by it, and the diner's table in the joining room, but not farther. My hearing is poor also; people must repeat and rephrase a thing for me to understand them. However, I seem always to hear when my stew bubbles too high and needs the heat less. I'm more attuned to my cooking, I suppose, than I am to anything else.

I cook with the lid off the pot, so I may stir it. I face big, grey billows of steam that rise regardless of how much or how little liquid there is before me. The heat and the smell are always strong. I feel it on my skin; the scent of stew never leaves my nose. I wave the steam aside with many bats of the hand so I can see past to my cooking. When I bow my head, my dim eyes pick out fat, thick chunks of beef that seem as if too much to chew. There are bent chicken strips that appear about to shrink away as I study them simmering in the pot's belly. I find bits of food in every stage from raw to cooked and hard. I ladle out a spoonful sometimes to test it. I love to find the broth a good, warm brown or golden brown, tinged by both meat and vegetables. Often, I taste this sample though my cooking is meant for the patrons. These quickly taken bites are my food for the day; I never eat a separate lunch or dinner. I would not have it differently either, my hunger too little for anything more than what I am making—even if I could get extra. I chew my sampled beef or potato and enjoy them many times. On occasion, however, I overheat and wind up burning my tongue on the food. I have dropped my ladle and chipped the pot brim more than once with the pain this causes. I hate doing it but never seem to help it in the moment. In any case, I do not leave my mouth long on the ladle when sampling. My saliva then would get into the stew and make the broth watery-thin. Who really, do you think, would enjoy a stew moist from someone's mouth?

I find often the taste of my stew a surprise. I know it has beef or chicken in it, tomatoes, carrots at any one time. However, what I detect with my tongue never seems just one or two of these. I pick up instead an unknown number of things that have gone into the stew the untold time I have been cooking it. Flavors of all my past attempts with chicken, fish, beef, goat, with hot peppers and savory onions, have stayed in it as I never (and no one else I'm sure) have undertaken to wash the pot. I play the game sometimes that I can tell the broth has a certain taste for the chicken I added to it just an hour past. There always is something extra though, some flavor that seeps in, that I cannot explain neatly. The exact form the stew takes on cooking is itself a mystery to me. The meat, vegetables, and liquid all seem a great heap much of the time. I may spoon from it to serve the diner patrons, but then I add new items, fresh cuts of pork, sliced beans. These bits all clump together eventually. If my stew gains any shape, I'd have to say it is a large ball. I find this strange many times. I stir and the whole stew can spin around at once. My work to turn the food is a struggle: heavy parts resist, liquid sloshes and scalds my hand. I would never leave off the labor though and have the bits, hidden at the bottom, burn, the top fail to heat.

I prepare what will go into the stew on the counter beside the stove. I get the meat and the vegetables for it from the refrigerator by the counter sink. The other staff at the diner buys this for me and, fortunately, gets plenty every time, so I am never short supplied. The meat I unpackage from the fridge is in huge slabs—whole chickens, entire racks of lamb—so I cut it to a size I can work. That is thick, mouthable wedges. I cut at the veins, membranes, excess fat, and other gunk in the meat that I do not want eaten. Of course, I have cooked plenty of beef marbled with fat since removing it all would wear me much too much. (I cannot manage all things, however I wish.) After working at the fat, I cut my meat into bits. The vegetables go likewise. I slice the tomatoes and bell peppers into small cubes. If the vegetables have

an edible peel, I leave it on; the roughage does my patrons good to digest their meal's strange odds and ends. Once I cut everything, I drop meat and vegetables straight into the pot. Many times, the new meat might be different than the stuff already cooking but I find it all soon gains one flavor on heating. I spice the new items in the stew as possible to give them a kick: with paprika, cumin, oregano. A good shake of them all makes me feel I have helped the meat right, even when, as is usually the case, I cannot stop to consider how the flavors might combine. On the other hand, I have not spiced on several occasions, being low, and found the whole of the cooking tasted fine regardless. The seasoning already in the stew makes up for it, I think.

The patrons show up to eat of my stew both at lunch and dinner. The good men and women come to me in the kitchen and I serve them from the pot with my ladle. Many ask that I fill bowls they bring from home rather than use the diner's. They are particular about this, I have learned. One fellow told me he felt proud using his own dish. "Cannot leave it behind," he insisted, straightening his back. I find, however, many of my patrons use the diner's bowls just as well. They are the less particular folk. I leave plenty in the sink for them. I never have washed these bowls and neither does the staff; they are coated with the sticky, patchy residue of the many past lunches and dinners eaten in them. Most patrons do not shy from using these, in fact they take them gladly. "The food has a fuller taste in your bowls," one man told me with a smile. "A range, really."

Once I have served from my pot, the patrons go to eat at the long table in the joining room off the kitchen where I see them easily since there is no wall. The patrons take places around the table and hunker over the food, many bringing their face down to their bowls, nearly nosing them, and eat. I watch them chew with round, grinding motions of the mouth. Many get quite consumed in the act, I discover. During their meals, the men and women pass words with their companions which I may catch. Some speak right to the bowls before their lips, as if talking with them; these individuals make lunch in every sense an intimate, personal matter. When done, the people who had brought dishes—and even utensils—stow them in their bags or briefcases and leave. Many do it curtly, as if in a hurry to forget about the meal. Their speedy withdrawal makes me feel I have cooked their lunch poorly. The patrons who borrowed bowls from the kitchen return those to my sink. A patron, trying to be personable, may hand back one with the stew all eaten. I like the patron who does this, because I can leave these bowls alone for next time, no extra labor on my part. However, many patrons return bowls with food left inside, a hard piece of beef, some untouched turnip. I pour the uneaten part back into my pot. I do not like to do this. I dislike the patrons' saliva in the stew even more than my own. However, I cannot waste food in my kitchen.

From my stove, I listen sometimes as the patrons talk about my stew. They often suggest how to improve it; at other times, they complain outright over its quality. I am busy enough in the kitchen that their remarks may affect me as I cook and I would not know it. I attend to only one thing at a time; I haven't much mind for indirect suggestion, I don't think. On the other hand, I admit I have tried to cook in a new way or two based on things I overheard the patrons say. Whether I do anything significant or not when I try, I find when sampling the pot that the food never tastes much different, nor do I hear the patrons receive it with any more than their usual praise or disfavor. It may be that they have thought differently of the food and just do not speak up. Or I may not hear them say as much, thanks to my bad ears or my constant motion at the stove. And perhaps my tongue does not catch some subtleties of flavor in the stew when I try to judge. (When you have eaten from the stuff as long as I have, it often just tastes the same.) I do not trouble much to explain my failure. In the end, I believe what matters in cooking is the stir of the ladle and the heat firing under my pot's bottom. Taste will speak to who has it and when.

As I go on cooking, I find I can weary of it. I chop the beef and it all seems so many blocks at the end. I endure rather than enjoy the steam from the pot. I consider at times what I am doing here in this diner, toiling as if forever. I never can justify it to myself even when I admit that someone else could cook for the patrons as easily. And since I cannot justify it, I simply go on cooking. I sleep each night by the stove and wake to a fresh, new day at my great pot. The question of why I do it will eat at me when it comes.