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In spite of the busy day awaiting me, I didn't want to get out of bed this morning. Those soft flannel sheets were just too comfy and cozy. I might have stayed there all morning if somehow someone had brought me a cup of strong, milky coffee or tea. But no one did. So, digging deep to find a tiny smidgen of willpower, I finally wrenched myself from the warm cave.

Yes, I was that kid. The only one in the neighborhood who had no trouble sleeping in. I'm not talking teenagers here. We all know they do their best to stay in bed until the crack of noon. But small children, my sister and brother were among them, are famous for leaping from bed at dawn. Not me. If a stray beam of light penetrated the curtains, my curly head just burrowed deeper into the pillow. That extra hour was not necessarily for sleeping but for dreaming. I suppose it still is.

These final, frigid days of January aren't a bad time to slow down and dream a bit. Well, except when you are striding across the supermarket parking lot with wind chills of minus fourteen degrees. If that's the case, don't slow down; whatever you do, keep going! Otherwise, grab that cup of strong, milky tea and get comfortable with a good book. Whether you actually read it or not is up to you. Stare out the frosty window and let your thoughts wander aimlessly. Drifting from here to Timbuktu and back again, you never know what you may find. In case you're wondering, Timbuktu is in western Africa on the edge of the hot and sunny Sahara dessert.

While you're at it, you might want to dream up a few new recipes. It's comfort food season. Let your mind wander to the dishes your mother or grandmother used to make. (Or the ones you wished they'd made. My mother was not an enthusiastic cook. Same goes for her mother and grandmother.) Maybe your new recipe will be better than anything found in the kitchens of your childhood. If not, well, the cold weather will be with us for a while; just dream up another tomorrow.

Wonderful soups and cozy stews are perfect winter fare. To stay healthy during these ice-cold days and freezing nights, think hearty and nutritious. Don't know where to start? A practical first step is to check your pantry, refrigerator and freezer. My pantry is usually packed with pasta, crushed tomatoes, beans, lentils, olives, onions, garlic and more. There are always carrots and celery in my refrigerator, not to mention a few leftovers. Chances are good, there's chicken, a few sausages, spinach and homemade chicken or turkey stock in the freezer. And if I'm out of homemade stock, there should be a box of broth in the cupboard.

After taking stock of your ingredients, consider your dreams. Are you dreaming of sandy beaches? Turn those reveries into a Caribbean black bean soup or a spicy Middle Eastern stew with chickpeas and chicken. Earning for a warm spring day in the French countryside? How about cassoulet or lentil and sausage soup? Or recreate an evening in Bologna with a thick, rich sauce Bolognese over tagliatelle.

Now all you need to do is take a break from the daydreams, roust yourself from the sofa and throw everything into a pot. The interruption will be worth the effort. As you settle back into the sofa, you'll be rewarded with the rich aromas of bubbling goodness.

Stay warm and bon appétit!






Chicken, Sausage & Bean Ragù

Too thick for a soup, this one pot meal can simmer while you read a book or dream by the fire. Enjoy!

Serves 10-12

- 1 pound dried small white or cannellini beans, soaked overnight or about 6 cups cooked beans
- 1 1/2 large onion, cut the half onion in half again and chop the whole one
- 5 stalks celery, cut 1 in thirds, chop the remaining 4
- 5 carrots, cut 1 in thirds, chop the remaining 4
- 2 bay leaves
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
- 1 pound Italian sausage, sweet or hot or a mix
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 3-4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh rosemary
- Pinch chili pepper
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 2 pounds bone-in chicken breasts, skins removed
- 3 - 4 quarts chicken stock
- 28 - 32 ounce can crushed tomatoes
- Parmigiano-Reggiano rind* (about 2x3-inches) (optional)
- 1 pound frozen spinach
- 4-6 ounces angel hair pasta, broken into 1-2 inch pieces
- Garnish: grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (optional)

Drain and rinse the beans. Put the beans, half onion, celery and carrot chunks and 1 bay leaf in a large pot, add cold water to cover plus 2 inches and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to very low, cover and simmer until the beans are tender about 1 – 1 1/4 hours. Remove the onion, carrot, celery and bay leaf, drain and rinse the beans and season with salt and pepper. (Can be done ahead or use about 6 cups canned beans, rinsed and drained.)

Meanwhile, remove the sausage casings. Heat a little olive oil in a soup pot over medium high heat, add the sausage and, breaking the meat up into small pieces, sauté until lightly browned. Remove the sausage from the pot, drain on paper towels and reserve.

Add the chopped onion, celery and carrots to the pot, season with salt and pepper and sauté until the onion is translucent. Add the garlic, thyme and rosemary and cook for 2-3 minutes more.

Add the wine and remaining bay leaf and simmer until the wine has reduced by half. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and add it to the vegetables with the crushed tomatoes, Parmigiano-Reggiano rind and 3 quarts stock. Bring the ragù to a simmer, cover and reduce the heat to low. Simmer for about 20 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through.

Remove the chicken from the pot. When the chicken is cool enough to handle, cut or shred into bite-sized pieces.

Add the chicken, beans and spinach to the ragù. Add more stock if the ragù is too thick. *If you have the time, remove the ragù from the heat, cool to room temperature and refrigerate for several hours.* If not, bring the ragù to a simmer and simmer on low for about 15 minutes.

Raise the heat to high and bring the ragù to a boil. Add the angel hair pasta* and cook until al dente, about 2 minutes. Turn off the heat and let the ragù sit for 2-3 minutes. Ladle into bowls and serve with a sprinkle of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano.

** A piece of Parmigiano-Reggiano rind will give the ragù for more flavor and richness.*

** If you won't be serving the entire pot of ragù in one go, remove the extra ragù from the pot before adding the pasta. The ragù freezes nicely so don't worry about making too much. When adding the pasta, plan on 1/2-1 ounce per serving.*