

# Omi's Chicken Soup

Courtesy of Anne Riesenfeld

My Omi says that she thinks God forgot about her down here. If he doesn't remember anytime soon, we'll celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in April of 2008. Omi came to New York in 1940, where she worked as a seamstress in a brassiere factory. She is German and Jewish, which may bring a certain personality type to mind that is probably, for soup-making purposes, accurate enough.

My father, my sister and I all make chicken soup, and we all think that ours is Omi's Chicken Soup, despite the fact that we all make it differently. The one constant among us is that the soup must jell after a night in the refrigerator. If it doesn't jell, it's a failure pure and simple. In a moment of weakness we might admit it to each other, but *never* to Omi.

So I recently called Omi to get the official recipe.

**Me:** Omi, I'd love to get your recipe for chicken soup.

**Omi:** Well, what is there really to know? You get a chicken. You know, when I was working in the factory a young American girl asked me, "How do you make your chicken soup?" I told her how to make it - it's so simple you know - but the next day she came in to work miserable. "It was *awful* Frieda! My apartment smelled terrible and we couldn't eat it." Well, they clean the chicken for you now, but back then, when you got a chicken you got the whole chicken. It had the insides that you had to take out. But, I never thought I had to tell this poor girl. Can you imagine the smell? It was very funny. We laughed for years about that. So.

**Me:** So, you get a chicken...?

**Omi:** You want a stewing chicken, an old chicken. You put it in the pot with the neck and heart and whatever else they give you. And, ach to God, don't put too much water! People always put too much water in the pot. The soup tastes like nothing. It won't jell.

**Me:** OK. So, just enough water to cover it?

**Omi:** Ja. Not too much.

**Me:** And what else? Vegetables?

**Omi:** Of course, some soup vegetables.

**Me:** Well, which vegetables are soup vegetables?

**Omi:** Ach Annie, you know what soup vegetables are.

**Me:** Onion?

**Omi:** Sure.

**Me:** Carrots? Celery?

**Omi:** Yes.

**Me:** Anything else?

**Omi:** Sure *schätzele*, whatever you want.

**Me:** Do you put salt and pepper?

**Omi:** Of course. Chopped parsley if you want to.

**Me:** OK, then you cook it for how long?

**Omi:** Well, you cook it for a long time just at a simmer. Then you clean the chicken off the bones and you have your soup. You might put some noodles or rice with it. Now Annie, how are the children?

Because it is this way with Omi, my gut still tells me that there is an absolute right way to make her chicken soup, and an infinite number of wrong ways. I don't think she is keeping it from me, I think she just feels it's common sense. Maybe that's the key to making Omi's Chicken Soup: having the certitude that *your* way is the right way.

So friends, my advice to you is to find the hidden German, Jewish grandmother in yourself and make your family some chicken soup. Let me know how it goes. That is, unless it doesn't jell.

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I wrote this in 2007. The post script is that God remembered my Omi (my tough-as-nails, Holocaust-surviving grandmother) on January 1st of this year, 3 months short of her 104th birthday. Unbeknownst to one another, my sister and I were both moved to make chicken soup that day.

Anne Riesenfeld