
FOR A GOOD TIME . . .

Out of the Wasteland

THERE'S A FREE MEAL WAITING FOR YOU IN YOUR
FREEZER; JUST ADD IMAGINATION AND MELD

By Serena Bass



Beneath this crust lurks cassoulet. BOB CAREY

I was driving home from watching the New Year's Eve fireworks in the first hour of 1/1/11, listening to a repeat broadcast of WNYC's Leonard Lopate interviewing Jonathan Bloom, author of *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)*. They were talking about a virtual Rose Bowl that could be filled with all the food we discard. Then, when it's full, we start all over again.

NOMAD EDITIONS REAL EATS

Firstly, I was already full of resolve, not just a limp-dick resolution but a sturdy resolve to get thinner by eating better.

At the party I'd been to, there were one-inch-square croque-monsieur hors d'oeuvres and suddenly, out of nowhere, I found myself holding a giant slab of pre-cut-up croque-monsieur and, with a giddy new friend (also with a slab in hand), heading for the roof. Just for fun.

This is exactly the kind of behavior I am currently fully against.

There will be absolutely no more impulse eating, no grabbing of giant sandwiches, I muttered to myself; food will always be considered. So, back to Mr.

My favorite story about Mario Batali involves him diving into a restaurant kitchen's garbage bin and pulling out food that he insisted was perfectly usable.

Bloom and Leonard Lopate. They were taking the consideration of food a step further and extolling the worldwide benefits of concocting your next meal (or two) directly from that which you already have in the fridge. Since this is actually my *totally* favorite thing to do, I was all ears and would have clapped

loudly if I hadn't been driving over the Brooklyn Bridge. I once brought everyone to their feet with a scream when I opened the trash and saw a half-eaten chicken carcass resting on the coffee grounds. (My favorite story about Mario Batali involves him diving into a restaurant kitchen's garbage bin and pulling out

food that he insisted was perfectly usable. Rock on, Mario!)

Two O’Clock Rock

When I woke up a little bit later on 1/1/11, I opened the fridge. I had, at 2 a.m., texted my son and fam. that I would bring dinner over that evening, so sure was I of the untold, unused food I had available.

The fridge, on inspection... not so much.

The freezer on the other hand... Woo hoo!!

I wasn’t sure whether to be delighted or embarrassed that I had all the makings of a fine cassoulet stashed away under ice and had no recollection of *any* of it being in there. (The fact that

The concept of composing a meal out of forgotten freezer food is to stand back, like an artist with a very long brush, and outline an “idea” of a dish.

I have no light in the fridge or freezer kind of keeps things exciting.)

The Haul:

- 2 lamb shanks
- 1 pound Schaller and Weber double-smoked bacon
- 2 pounds organic spicy turkey sausage

- A quart of homemade chicken stock
- Half a box of Pomi crushed tomatoes
- A large Ziploc bag of cooked black beans
- A heel of white peasant bread

I felt like a magician, pulling

out an endless string of flags.

The fridge did have a nice big onion and a good head of garlic, plus half a bottle of red wine. I was set, as black beans are as good as white beans for cassoulet, I decided.

I put the Cryovac-ed lamb in warm water to defrost and went for a walk. Then I put everything together (and PS, those five little words took a goodly while) and *then* — even later on, on 1/1/11 — walked the cassoulet up to my son’s house for dinner. He had roundly ignored my text, and he and his wife had made fabulous baby back ribs, a couscous full of cashews and dried cranberries, and a brilliant, composed winter salad. I could hardly complain of the

ethnic melding since my fusion cassoulet fit right in. The meal ended with coffee ice cream on a stick from Chinatown. We hit melding out of the park.

The concept of composing a meal out of leftovers and forgotten freezer food is to stand back a bit, like an artist with a very long brush, and outline an “idea” of a dish. Said dish might not be classically correct, but with a little inspiration and going off-road recipe wise, you might create your own masterpiece. This recipe (below) would be expensive to go out and buy from scratch, *but*, if you just look at what’s in the fridge and throw the words *stew*, *soup*, *pasta*, *gratin* and *salad* up in the air, certainly

something will come to you. You’ll get a medal, and some less-enlightened person can add to the Rose Bowl.

Black Bean Cassoulet

THE LAMB SHANKS IN MARINADE

- 2 lamb shanks
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh rosemary
- 1 large clove of garlic, crushed
- Pinch of hot pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

THE SAUCE BASE

- ¼ cup diced, double-smoked bacon
- 1 large onion, peeled and sliced ¼-inch thick
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced
- About 12 ounces, or 1 ½ cups, Pomi crushed tomatoes
- 1 ½ cups red wine
- 2 cups homemade chicken stock

THE SPICY SAUSAGE AND THE BEANS

- 2 pounds organic spicy turkey sausages, cut into 2-inch lengths
- 8 ounces black beans
- 4 garlic cloves, unpeeled

- 3 bay leaves

THE CRISP TOP

- A heel of white peasant bread, diced and pulsed to rough breadcrumbs (about 2 cups)
- 1 ounce unsalted butter

- 1.** Put the lamb shanks in a bowl with all the marinade ingredients and set aside for an hour. Then put them in a hot sauté pan and cook, turning a couple of times till they are browned. Set aside.
- 2.** Put the bacon in a large sauté pan over medium heat and cook till the fat is rendered. Remove just the bacon nuggets and tip in with the lamb.
- 3.** Sauté the sausages in the

bacon fat till browned, then remove from the pan and set aside.

- 4.** Add the onion and garlic to the pan, sauté for 10 minutes, or until wilted but not browned. Add the crushed tomatoes, wine and chicken stock, and stir to combine. Then add the lamb and bacon nuggets. The liquid should come about 2/3 of the way up the shanks, and if it doesn't, transfer to a smaller pan.
- 5.** Cover and cook for about 2 hours, then add the sausages. Cook for another half hour, or until you can pull the lamb off the bone with a fork. Leave the lamb in the sauce and discard the lamb bones.
- 6.** Melt the butter in a small pan. Add the breadcrumbs,

stir to coat and sauté till
crisp and pale golden.

7. Transfer the cassoulet
mixture to a serving dish,
scatter with the
breadcrumbs and either put
back in the freezer (haha) or
bake in a 375 degree oven for
20 minutes.

Questions or comments?

Write to Serena at [sbass](mailto:sbass@nomadeditions.com)
'at' nomadeditions.com 🍷