

CALDO DE PIEDRA

BY FRANCESCA PRESTON

I just came back from Mexico, where I got to eat stone soup. It is a pre-Hispanic dish, practically ancient, and in Oaxaca you can only find it in one roadside restaurant outside the city. In giant letters the sign says CALDO DE PIEDRA. The family who makes the soup is actually from a region eight hours away, where the soup was born, but they received permission from village officials to truck their river stones the distance, and prepare this ritualistic broth in a different place.

It seems that most of us have an idea, a dream-memory, of what stone soup is: the entirely believable fairy tale about having nothing and making a feast from water and stones. I remember thinking about that soup when I was young, wondering if it tasted like the inside of a cave, opaque and mysterious. I'm not sure if I ever got to taste it. But this Caldo de Piedra that I had is real, and curative, and I want to write about it because a great friend has asked me for the meaning of abundance.

So, the soup: You sit in the unadorned space of the restaurant and watch while your food is made. There are embers from a fire that has burned all day, and in those embers the men use long tongs made from split saplings to turn gray striated rocks. On the table in front of the fire half of a large dried gourd sits. Into the gourd another man pours water, onion, tomato, two pieces of cool white fish and three huge shrimp, still translucent blue. As you watch, the first man takes the tongs, picks up the blackened heart of a stone, taps it a bit against the hearth, and then deposits it into the lake of your soup, which instantly begins to boil, great waves of aromatic broth snapping into the air—another stone goes in—and then the steaming gourd is brought to your table, the mixture churning and succulent, where it continues to cook the entire time you are eating it, from the source of the two hot stones at the bottom of your bowl, and tasting like the sea on fire.

I guess you can tell this soup rocked my world. I wished right then that I could eat it every day, or learn to make it myself somehow, to improvise. Because of my interest the ember-man gave me two of the river rocks (you can only use them once!) to compare with mine at home. I could show them to you if you like, perhaps we could figure out how to make this allegorical, primal broth together. And I do think it's primal: The water, the rock, the fish, the gourd, the flame. What else do we need to feed each other, really? With what simpler means could we transform matter into pleasure?

I have noticed, upon returning home, that in the newspapers graphs, spikes, and jaggedy lines have replaced the photographs of faces, gatherings, buildings. And Americans punch a few more notches into the belt of fear, pulling it tighter, so that perhaps they may be able neither to eat nor breathe. But I balk (¡por supuesto!) at the idea that charts are more important than faces, that stocks are more worthy than hot, handmade soup.



From the perspective of Mexico it seems like a futile effort to attempt to separate sadness from health, and fear from fertility. In the grand covered marketplaces (where one can buy fish, gourds, and probably rocks) it is necessary at first to feel lost, even afraid, because then you must ask for help from someone you don't know. You say to an old woman with long braids that you are looking for fish—maybe you swim like a fish in order to make your point—and she laughs and points in the direction of the alley of the fish-mongers. She also warns you about pickpockets and gives you a bunch of her small, bound herbs. This is good, now you feel like you have a friend in the market, and people begin to know you. You descend into the labyrinth of grasshoppers and chiles and thieves and new brides, all dancing alongside each other and you, exchanging this for that.

As far as I can see, the only thing we lack in this culture (you know which one I'm talking about, right?) is intimacy, closeness—the heat that happens when people do things together, conspire and invent, celebrate for no other reason than the celebration itself. So I would like to propose that if we must live in dire times, we find new-old ways to inhabit the words that we are given: that in this 'recession' (recess: to pull back, have a break between) or potentially even 'depression' (an invitation to go deeper, down, closer to the fat heart of things), we take the time to correspond and congregate, to make winter soup from stones that we have gathered ourselves, together. And perhaps we will learn again to know fire.

Francesca Preston calls herself a grafista: poet, essayist, photographer, thoughtful mark-maker. She is concerned primarily with the native stories of place, and how to dig them up without disturbing the roots. Francesca is based in Berkeley, but her arms reach out to the counties of Sonoma and Calaveras, where family farms beckon. You can leave her your marks at datesugar@gmail.com.

Photograph: Francesca Preston