

Excerpt from Tamar Adler's An Everlasting Meal

One
How to Boil Water

When is water boiling? When, indeed, is water water?

—M. F. K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*

There is a prevailing theory that we need to know much more than we do in order to feed ourselves well. It isn't true. Most of us already have water, a pot to put it in, and a way to light a fire. This gives us boiling water, in which we can do more good cooking than we know.

Our culture frowns on cooking in water. A pot and water are both simple and homely. It is hard to improve on the technology of the pot, or of the boil, leaving nothing for the cookware industry to sell.

The pot was invented 10,000 years ago, and a simmering one has been a symbol of a well-tended hearth ever since. I don't mean to suggest that now that you have been reminded of the age and goodness of a pot of water, you start boiling everything in your kitchen—but that instead of trying to figure out what to do about dinner, you put a big pot of water on the stove, light the burner under it, and only when it's on its way to getting good and hot start looking for things to put in it.

In that act, you will have plopped yourself smack in the middle of cooking a meal. And there you'll be, having retrieved a pot, filled it, and lit a burner, jostled by your own will a few steps farther down the path toward dinner.

There are as many ideas about how to best boil water as there are about how to cure hiccups. Some people say you must use cold water, explaining that hot water sits in the pipes, daring bacteria to inoculate it; others say to use hot, arguing that only a fool wouldn't get a head start. Debates rage as to whether olive oil added to water serves any purpose. (It only does if you are planning to serve the water as soup, which you may, but it makes sense to wait to add the oil until you decide.)

Potatoes should be started in cold water, as should eggs. But sometimes I find myself distractedly adding them to water that's already boiling, and both turn out fine. Green and leafy vegetables should be dropped at the last second into a bubble as big as your fist. Pasta, similarly, should only be added when a pot is rollicking, and stirred once or twice.

Ecclesiastical writers on the subject point out that in the beginning there was water, all life proceeded from water, there was water in Eden, water when we fell, then the slate got cleaned with it. Water breaks, and out we come.

The point, as far as I can tell, is that water has been at it, oblivious to our observations, for longer than we know.

I recommend heating up a great deal of it, covered if you're in a rush, because it will boil faster that way, or uncovered if you need time to figure out what you want to boil. As long as it's a big pot and the water in it gets hot, whichever technique you choose and however you time your addition of ingredients, the world, which began by some assessments with a lot of water at a rolling boil, will not come to an end.

Julia Child instructs tasting water periodically as it climbs toward 212 degrees to get used to its temperature at each stage. Her advice might be overzealous, but it teaches an invaluable lesson, not about boiling, but about learning to cook: if there is anything that you can learn from what is happening, learn it. You don't *need* to know how the properties of water differ at 100 degrees and at 180, but by tasting it at those temperatures you may learn something about your pot or your stove, or the spoon you like best for tasting.

Once your water reaches a boil, salt it well. The best comparison I can make is to pleasant seawater. The water needs to be this salty whether it's going to have pasta cooked in it or the most tender spring peas. It must be salted until it tastes good because what you're doing isn't just boiling an ingredient, but cooking one thing that tastes good in another, which requires that they both taste like something.

All ingredients need salt. The noodle or tender spring pea would be narcissistic to imagine it already contained within its cell walls all the perfection it would ever need. We seem, too, to fear that we are failures at being tender and springy if we need to be seasoned. It's not so: it doesn't reflect badly on pea or person that either needs help to be most itself.

Add salt by hand so that you start to get a feel for how much it takes, and as you do, taste the water repeatedly. This may at first feel ridiculous, and then it will start to seem so useful you'll stand by the pot feeling quite ingenious. Even though the water is boiling you can test it with your finger. If it's well seasoned, just tapping the surface will leave enough on your skin for you to taste.

When you find yourself tasting your water, you are doing the most important thing you ever can as a cook: the only way to make anything you're cooking taste good, whether it's water or something more substantial, is to make sure all its parts taste good along the way. There are moments in cooking when common sense dictates not to taste—biting into a dirty beet or raw potato—but taste anything else from a few minutes after you start cooking it until it's done. You don't need to know what it's supposed to taste like: what anything is supposed to taste like, at any point in its cooking, is good. This is as true for water as for other ingredients.

Boiling has a bad name and steaming a good one, but I categorically prefer boiling.

We think we're being bullish with vegetables by putting them in water when we're actually being gentle. There may be nothing better than the first tiny spring potatoes and

turnips, their pert greens still attached, or the first baby cabbages, thickly wedged, all boiled.

Salted water seasons the vegetable, which means that by the time it comes out, it is already partially sauced. Additionally, boiling a vegetable improves the water as much as it does the vegetable. Water you've cooked cabbage in is better for making cabbage soup than plain water would be, and it's easier than making chicken stock.

The best vegetables to boil will be the ones in season. They will also be the ones with the most leaves, most stalks, longest stems. Knowing that you can simply boil the expensive, leafier vegetables at the farmers' market should help justify your buying them. All you have to do is cut them up and drop them in water, and you can drop *all* of them in water.

When you go hunting for vegetables for your boiling pot, don't be deterred by those stems and leaves. Though it's easy to forget, leaves and stalks are parts of a vegetable, not obstacles to it. The same is true for the fat and bones of animals, but I'm happy to leave that for now. You can cook them all.

We most regularly boil broccoli. If you do so obligatorily, I want to defend it. If you don't do it, because you've always held boiling in contempt, I suggest you buy a head of broccoli that is dark jade green, stalky, and bold; and while you're at it, one of cauliflower, whole, with light, leafy greens still attached; and boil each on its own. If only withered, mummified versions of either are available, they can be improved by slow stewing with olive oil, garlic, and lemon peel, but for boiling, only the best will do.

To boil broccoli or cauliflower, cut off the big, thick, main stem, or core. Cut the remainder of the heads into long pieces that are more like batons than florets, including stem and leaves on as many of them as you can. Cut the stem or core you've removed into equivalent-sized pieces and include them in your boiling, or save them to turn into the pesto of cores and stems on page 43.

Bring a big pot of water to boil, add salt, and taste. Drop the vegetables into the water and then let them cook, stirring once or twice. This does not, contrary to a lot of cooking advice, take only a minute. You don't need to stand over the pot, because your vegetables don't need to be "crisp" or "crisp-tender" when they come out.

For boiled vegetables to taste really delicious, they need to be cooked. Most of ours aren't. Undercooking is a justifiable reaction to the 1950s tendency to cook vegetables to collapse. But the pendulum has swung too far. When not fully cooked, any vegetable seems starchy and indifferent: it hasn't retained the virtues of being recently picked nor benefited from the development of sugars that comes with time and heat. There's not much I dislike more than biting into a perfectly lovely vegetable and hearing it squeak.

Vegetables are done when a sharp knife easily pierces a piece of one. If you're cooking broccoli or cauliflower, test the densest part of each piece, which is the stem. Remove the cooked vegetables from the water with a slotted spoon directly to a bowl and drizzle them with olive oil. If there are so many that they'll make a great mountain on each other, with the ones on top prevailing and the ones at the bottom of the bowl turning to sludge, spoon

them onto a baking sheet so they can cool a little, and then transfer them to a bowl.

There seems to be pressure these days to “shock” vegetables by submerging them in ice water to stop their cooking. The argument in favor of shocking vegetables is that it keeps them from changing color. If you drop cooked broccoli into ice water, it will stay as green as it ever was.

As a rule, I try not to shock anything. I also don’t think keeping a vegetable from looking cooked when it *is* cooked is worth the fuss.

A British chef named Fergus Henderson gently reprimands new cooks who want to plunge perfectly warm boiled vegetables into ice baths and tells them that fresh vegetables can be just as beautiful when they’re pale and faded. Nature isn’t persistently bright; it wears and ages. At Mr. Henderson’s restaurant St. John, the two most popular side dishes on the menu are boiled potatoes and cabbage boiled “to the other side of green,” and happy patrons, after a few bites of either damp, cooked-looking vegetable, order two or three servings with any meal.

A plate of boiled vegetables can be dinner, with soup and thickly cut toast rubbed with garlic and drizzled with olive oil. If you boil a few different vegetables, cook each separately. Dress each of them like you do broccoli, with olive oil, and if they’re roots or tubers, like turnips or potatoes, add a splash of white wine vinegar or lemon while they’re hot.

Once you have a vegetable cooked, you can cook a pound of pasta in the same water and use the boiled vegetable to make a wonderfully sedate, dignified sauce by adding a little of the pasta water, good olive oil, and freshly grated cheese.

Boiled broccoli and cauliflower both take particularly well to this.

Put two cups of either vegetable, boiled until completely tender and still warm, in a big bowl and leave it near the stove. Bring its water back to a boil and adjust its seasoning. If the water is too salty, add a bit of fresh water. When the water returns to a boil, add a pound of short pasta, like penne, orecchiette, or fusilli.

While the pasta is cooking, smash your vegetable a little with a wooden spoon and grate a cup of Parmesan or Pecorino cheese into the bowl.

Taste a piece of the pasta by scooping it out with a slotted spoon. When the pasta is nearly done, remove a glass of the pot’s murky water. This will help unite pasta, vegetable, and cheese. If you think you’ve pulled the water out before it’s as starchy and salty as it can be, pour it back and return for saltier, starchier water a minute or two later.

Scoop the pasta out with a big, handheld sieve or drain it through a colander and add it to the bowl with the vegetable and cheese, along with a quarter cup of pasta water, and mix well somewhere warm. This is always a good idea when you combine ingredients. Heat is a vital broker between separate things: warm ingredients added to warm ingredients are already in a process of transforming. They’re open to change. Even small amounts of heat, released from the sides of a pot while it simmers away, or by the warmed surface of

a heated oven, help. Whenever I'm mixing things that aren't going to cook together, I look around for odds and ends of heat.

This pasta is good as is, but is improved by a big handful of chopped raw parsley or toasted breadcrumbs.

I often push the limits of a single pot of water's utility, boiling broccoli or cauliflower, then pasta, and then potatoes, all in succession, and then use the water to make beans. As long as you move from less starchy ingredients to more starchy ingredients, one pot of water can get you pretty far.

It almost always makes sense, if you've bought a slew of vegetables, to cook more than you need for a given meal. If you can muster it, you should go ahead and cook vegetables you're not even planning to use that night. The chapter "How to Stride Ahead" explains how and why to cook a lot of vegetables at once, then transform them into meals on subsequent days. In it, I recommend roasting because you can fit a lot in your oven at one time and then go do other things. But while you have a pot of water boiling and are standing near it, let it do you proud.

The simplicity of boiling vegetables might be maligned in our country, but the idea of boiled meat is pure anathema. Meals of boiled meat, though, are cornerstones of the world's great food cultures.

In each of the really good ones, the elements of the boiling pot are served separately. This means that you either get a very elaborate meal from one pot or the building blocks for a number of them.

In France, pot-au-feu, a traditional meal of boiled meat and vegetables, is served in stages: first comes a bowl of rich broth with a thin toast and a marrow-filled bone with a silver spoon for scooping, then a plate of the meat and vegetables themselves. In northern Italy, region of truffles and cream, the broth of bollito misto is served similarly, on its own, adorned with little tortellini. Once they've finished their broth, diners select the pieces of meat they want from gilded carts.

We are probably most familiar with the English boiled dinner, which has none of that pomp about it, and a bad reputation. To be fair, only some of boiled meats' bad reputation owes to the British. The rest owes to it so regularly being boiled badly. There's a misleading laxity to the terminology of boiling. In neither pot-au-feu nor bollito misto—nor the English version, for that matter—is the meat actually boiled: the term refers more to ingredients being cooked in a pot of water than to the violent rumble of a real boil. Pasta and plain vegetables are the only things you *truly* boil; everything else would get bounced around too much, ending up tough or just worn out.

Boiling meat must mean, in addition to cooking it in water, a commitment to stewarding it through a process of enriching both meat and cooking medium, and being careful not to deplete either. The nuance of this commitment is most poetically illustrated by the centuries-old debate in French cooking about whether, when you cook beef and vegetables in water to make pot-au-feu, you're cooking the meat (called the *bouille*) or

the broth. It doesn't need resolution: it's the Zen koan of boiling.

The best instructions I've read for how to make good boiled meat come, in fine, predictable irony, from the nineteenth-century cookbook *The Cook's Oracle* by the British physician William Kitchiner: "Take care of the liquor you have boiled your meat in; for in these times, no good housewife has any pretensions to rational economy, who boils a joint without making some sort of soup. If the liquor be too salt, only use half the quantity, and the rest water ... boil or rather stew the meat slowly, instead of fast, and ... take it up when it is done enough."

Those are the fundamentals: cook your meat until it's done, not a minute longer. If your broth tastes too thin, let it go on cooking; if it's too salty, water it down.

Dr. Kitchiner goes on to give detailed instructions for boiling mutton leg, neck, lamb, beef, veal, calf's head, pork, tongue, rabbit, and tripe. Mutton and calves' heads are good for special occasions, but for developing a practice, I recommend boiling a chicken.

Chicken is already a mainstay of American diets. Roasted chicken is wonderful and produces great drippings, but a chicken cooked in a pot of water leaves you with several dinners, lunches, and extra broth, and is an appropriate and honest way to do a lot with a little.

Buy a whole chicken at a farmers' market if you can. They're much more expensive—up to three times as expensive—as chickens raised in factories, which most, even the ones labeled "free range," are. The two are completely different animals. As soon as you boil a chicken that was raised outdoors, pecking at grubs, you'll notice that its stock is thick, golden, and flavorful. When it cools, it will thicken. Chickens that've led chicken-y lives develop strong, gelatinous bones, which contribute to the soup you get from them and to how good they are for you. If you're getting more meals out of your chicken, and more nutrition out of those meals, spending the extra money makes sense.

If your chicken comes with its feet on, cut them off at the knee joint. This is easy, if unsettling the first time you do it. If you end up with chicken feet, freeze them in a plastic bag for making chicken stock, for which there are directions on page 166.

I salt chicken for boiling or any cooking a day ahead, if I've planned that far. It gives the seasoning time to take and ensures you don't end up with underseasoned meat and salty broth. If you forget, salt the chicken more heavily and three hours ahead, and leave it sitting at room temperature, which will help the meat absorb the salt.

If you buy your chicken from a local farmer, there's a good chance it will come with its giblets (liver, heart, and gizzard) inside, though not attached. I've included a recipe for chicken liver pâté on pages 172–73.

If it has been salted overnight, let the chicken come to room temperature before you cook it. The water won't have to spend as much time heating the meat through, and it will cook before getting tough.

There are two ways to deal with vegetables for a boiled chicken meal. Neither is better

than the other. If you've got time for an extra step, for a four-pound chicken, put the ends—not tops—of three carrots (or all of one), half an onion, a stalk of celery, any strange leek-looking thing you find, a bunch of parsley stems, a few whole stems of thyme, a bay leaf, and a whole clove of garlic in your pot underneath the chicken and cover it all by three inches of water. The carcass will hold them down, and you won't have to knock them away when you skim the pot. You could truss the chicken for more even cooking, but I don't. Set aside whole vegetables to cook separately in the finished broth once the chicken is cooked.

If you don't have time for extra cooking, add big chunks of carrot, celery, and fennel directly to your chicken pot. Cook them at the same time as the chicken, with the intention of serving them alongside. Potatoes, which will make the broth murky, can be added toward the end of the chicken's cooking.

This might be blasphemy, but I usually add a whole or half piece of star anise to my cooking water. Star anise is a ubiquitous spice in Asian and Middle Eastern poultry dishes, and the two ingredients have an affinity for each other. I occasionally also add a stick of cinnamon for about five minutes. The combination adds a little extra richness to the broth that's quite magical.

Let the pot come to a boil, then lower it to a simmer. Skim the gray scum that rises to the top of the pot and collects around its sides. You will have to skim it periodically. It doesn't mean anything is wrong with your chicken. There is scum in the finest of them, as in any meat or bean.

Cook the chicken at just below a simmer, starting to check for doneness after thirty minutes, and then retrieving each part as it's cooked. The vegetables might be done before the chicken. If they are, remove them. If the chicken's done first, which you'll know by when a leg, wiggled, begins to come loose, remove it.

I cook chickens leg side down because legs take longer to cook. This can make for messy testing for doneness, but I clumsily make do.

If wiggling doesn't feel reassuring, cut into a piece of leg when you think its time might be up. You will lose some juices, but you're only losing them into broth, which you're going to eat anyway. Regardless, that always seems an illogical argument for not testing the temperature of meat. Better to lose a few juices than to over- or undercook an entire piece of meat.

Remove the chicken. Taste the broth. If it doesn't taste delicious, let it go on cooking.

If you're going to eat it immediately, let the broth settle, then use a ladle to skim any fat off the top of the liquid by making a little whirlpool with your ladle and lightly skimming what rises to the top of the ladle. This takes practice. If you can wait, put the broth in the refrigerator. Tomorrow there will be a thin layer of fat over the top of the broth, which you can skim off with a spoon and save for sautéing vegetables or spreading on toast.

If I'm making a to-do of it, I serve some of the broth as a first course. In that case, I cook a few vegetables or pasta that are as small and beautiful as I can manage and serve a

spoonful of them in each bowl of broth.

If it's summer, dice a little zucchini and onion and cook them in butter in a pan. If it's spring, pull a little of the broth aside and cook English peas in a combination of broth and butter. If it's autumn, little cubes of butternut squash and rice are good. If it's winter, cook tiny pasta shells or heartier pasta, like tortellini.

Warm enough broth for everyone, then warm the vegetables, grains, or pasta in the broth, and ladle it out in bowls with spoonfuls of each in each.

If it's a second or third or fourth day soup I'm making, I pick off whatever meat is left on the carcass, heat up my broth, and cook noodles in it, omitting vegetables entirely and using enough noodles that the resulting soup is a golden broth, flush with swollen noodles and little bits of chicken. I like twisted pasta like fusilli and gemelli for this.

For a soup that's equally delicious but more rustic, toast thick slices of stale bread, put a slice at the bottom of individual soup bowls, and grate Parmesan cheese on them. Ladle hot broth over the toasts and top with lots of freshly cracked black pepper, a little more cheese, and olive oil. Make sure that the pepper is freshly cracked. When you've got only five ingredients and pepper's one of them—and two of the others are bread and broth—the small amounts of attention you put into each is not only tasteable, but where the meaning in the meal resides.

Generally on whatever day I cook it—which is often Sunday—I serve my chicken, cut into pieces, and some of the vegetables I've cooked with it. To cut a whole chicken into pieces, look for its joints and apply pressure to them in the direction opposite from the one in which they want to go. They will show you where to separate them. The breast can be cut down the middle with a heavy knife, and just above the ribs on both sides, or its meat can be carved off the breastbone by your pressing a knife blade against it and lifting the meat off the bone.

I cut each half of a breast into a few pieces because it makes the same amount of meat last longer. A half breast of a four-pound boiling bird is a lot of chicken if you're eating it accompanied by vegetables and a piquant sauce, like *salsa verde*.

Salsa verde is what's served with Italian boiled meals. It's the best accompaniment to boiled meat, and among the best accompaniments to anything.