Culinary Remains: Recipes for the Last Kitchen

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Introduction

The last time I wrote a menu, it was on a chalkboard scavenged from a shuttered daycare, propped between two crates of onions that were pretending to be fresh. The chalk squeaked across the board spelling out what we’d feed the block if the generator held and if the barter came through and if the river didn’t rise: stew, flatbread,

something green if we could find it. That “if” became our main spice—ubiquitous, invisible, and added to taste. A kitchen used to be a stage for performance and pride. Now it’s an engine room, where we keep the heart of this place thumping with a ladle and a stubborn refusal to let dinner die.

I wasn’t born an optimist, but I was born a cook, which is close enough. Cooks are gamblers with a better smell of the odds. We learn to transform what shows up—not what’s ideal—into something you can eat, maybe even something you can love. Out here, recipes aren’t commandments; they’re rumors. They’re also survival. If you’ve come for exact measurements, you may leave hungry. If you’ve come for methods that flex, for flavors that forgive, and for a way to feed a roomful of people with three carrots and a generous story, you’re in the right kitchen.

This book is a ledger of how we kept going: what we cooked, how we found it, and who we became standing shoulder to shoulder at the stove. You’ll find soups that stretch a handful of legumes into a crowd’s worth of warmth; flatbreads you can coax from a jar of flour dust and a stubborn skillet; ash-roasted roots that taste like history and smoke; pickles that keep company with the dark. The techniques are real because hunger is real—fermenting without gadgets, drying without a dehydrator, swapping without money. The politics of food didn’t end when the lights went out; they just got louder in the scraping of spoons. Every pot is a parliament, and every bowl is a vote.

I run a communal kitchen in what used to be the loading dock of a big-box store. All that concrete makes for good echoes; you can hear laughter ricochet between pillars on nights when the stew is thick and the trade was kind. On other nights the echoes carry quieter things: the hush of names we say before a meal; the clink of jars we’ve refilled from someone’s careful stash; the soft arguments about who gets the last slice of something sweet. This is a warm book about cold times. There is loss here, yes, but there is also the everyday comedy of turning a busted shopping cart into a proofing cabinet and calling it innovation with a straight face.

You’ll meet our people in these pages: Knife, who can julienne a nettle without getting stung; Sister, a forager with a psalm for every patch of purslane; Ten, who barters in multiples and swears by the alchemy of bone broth; and the Committee for Taste and Fairness, self-appointed and mostly effective. Their hands are in these recipes as much as mine. We’ve argued over spice rations, performed solemn rituals for the first jar to ferment each season, and learned the choreography of passing a single ladle down a line of twenty outstretched bowls without spilling or slighting.

I won’t lie to you about safety or scarcity. We err on the side of clean knives and boiling water. We treat jars like time capsules with a mean streak. We label, we smell, we listen for the small warnings food gives you if you’ve learned to hear it. There are no heroics in making someone sick. There is only patience, heat, and the humility to cut out the bad parts with a generous margin. When we can’t be fancy, we can be

careful. When we can’t be certain, we can be kind.

If I sound sardonic, it’s because humor keeps the pot from sticking. When sugar is rumor and coffee is myth, a joke becomes a condiment, bright as citrus. We learned to season grief the same way we season greens: with fat, acid, and a little heat. Some afternoons, the wind brings the smell of something burning far away, and we stir faster. Some mornings, the market under the bridge hums like it remembers a city. On those days, we add a sprig of something wild to the pot and call it a holiday.

This book won’t rebuild the world. It will remind you that a world can gather inside a bowl. That a line cook’s call—Behind! Hot! Corner!—can become a liturgy when repeated with care. That supply chains can be remade from handshakes and IOUs. That muscle memory is a kind of hope. Read it by candlelight or in the thin strip of sun that sneaks through the warehouse door. Read it standing at a stove of many fathers. Then close it, pick up a spoon, and feed whoever is near. That is the only recipe I will insist you follow.

CHAPTER ONE: The Smell of Boiling Hope

The first thing you learn about feeding people at the end of the world is that they don't care about your résumé. They don't want to hear that you once staged at a Michelin-starred restaurant in the city, that you can break down a whole lamb in eleven minutes, or that you know the difference between a chiffonade and a brunoise when your hands aren't shaking. What they care about is this: is there food in the pot, and is it going to taste like something worth sitting down for. I tell them yes. I tell them this every single day, and on the days when it's true, it's the closest thing to grace I've ever managed.

My name is Maren. I ran a bistro in the old world called The Silphium, named after a plant that had already gone extinct before I was even born, which felt poetic in the way that most things in the restaurant business feel poetic—mostly if you're drinking. I had a forty-seat dining room, a sous chef named Davi who could coax caramelization out of a beet like it was a confession, and a walk-in cooler that hummed like a contented animal. That kitchen is rubble now, or it's looted, or it's home to something that doesn't need refrigeration anymore. I don't go back to check. Some ruins you leave to the archaeologists, and some you leave to the weather.

What I have now is a loading dock behind what used to be a big-box home goods store. The store is gutted. The shelves were picked clean in the first seventy-two hours, and then the roof caved in over the hardware aisle, which at least gives us some shelter for the smokers. What remains is the concrete dock out back, about forty

feet by thirty, walled on three sides by the building's cinder-block exterior and open on the fourth to a gravel lot that we've turned into a kind of courtyard. There are tarps overhead, a jury-rigged hand pump for water we filter through a system that wouldn't pass a health inspection in any world, and a stove. The stove is the thing. I want to be clear about that. Everything starts with the stove.

It's a cobbled-tilted thing, built from a steel drum, some salvaged gas burners that a guy named Oren pulled from a strip mall restaurant in District Nine, and a grate system made from cut-up shelving brackets. It burns wood mostly, though we've rigged a side burner to run on propane canisters when we have them, which is less often than we'd like and more often than we deserve. The stove seats four pots at once, and on a good day it looks like a strange, beautiful altar to something humans have been doing since before they had language. Fire, water, vessel, ingredient. The calculus of feeding.

I don't remember exactly when the word "kitchen" started applying to this space. It crept in the way all shifts in language creep in—through repetition, necessity, and a collective agreement not to think about it too hard. We had a stove, we had pots, we had people who needed to eat. That's a kitchen. The loading dock became the dining area by default: we set up a long table made from a sheet of plywood braced across two metal shelving units, and people started sitting. Eating. Staying. That's a restaurant.

The first meal I cooked here was a mistake in the best sense of the word. I had found two cans of white beans—swollen, dented, but sealed—and a wilted bunch of kale that had been sitting in a puddle behind a grocery kiosk. There was a half-bag of rice someone had donated, though "donated" is generous. It was more like someone had abandoned it mid-flight, the way you drop anything you're carrying when you're running and then keep running. I also had salt. That's the part people forget to be grateful for. I had salt, a small bottle of olive oil that was cloudy and probably three months past its date, and a single garlic bulb I'd been keeping in my jacket pocket like a talisman.

I cooked the beans in water over the wood fire with a clove of garlic and a palm of salt, mashed them coarsely with the back of a wooden spoon I'd whittled from a broken broom handle, and wilted the kale into the mash with a splash of oil. We set the rice to boil in a separate pot with a pinch of salt and a prayer. Forty-three people showed up. I know because Ten counted. Ten counts everything.

It wasn't a great meal. The beans were undercooked in patches because the fire was uneven and I didn't know the drum stove's hot spots yet. The kale was bitter. The rice came out soupy because someone bumped the pot. But people ate, and they asked for seconds, and one woman—a retired nurse named Dolores who has since become our unofficial medic—closed her eyes after the first bite and said, "That tastes like a

Tuesday." I took it as the highest compliment I've ever received. In the old world, a Tuesday meal is the one you eat without thinking, without remembering, without being anywhere in particular. A Tuesday meal sustains. It doesn't dazzle. It keeps you alive and makes no apologies.

That's what we do here. We make Tuesday meals. Some of them, on a good day with a good scavenge, have a little something extra—a foraged herb, a scrap of cured meat, a wild onion pulled from a sidewalk crack. But the foundation is always the same: legumes, grains, greens, salt, fat, acid, heat. Those are the pillars. If you have those, you can feed people. If you're missing one, you improvise. And if you're missing more than one, you pray and get creative, not always in that order.

There's a rhythm to running a communal kitchen that is not so different from running a restaurant kitchen, if you sand down the obvious differences the way you'd sand down a warped board—slowly, and accepting that it will never be perfectly true. You wake before dawn. You check your stores. You send out your scavengers. You start your base—a big pot of something that can be diluted or concentrated depending on what comes back from the morning's runs. And you pray, not to any particular god, but to the general principle that the world will provide enough friction to keep the day interesting without grinding you to dust.

I write this part down because it matters: the base. Every kitchen in the old world had its mirepoix, its soffritto, its holy trinity. Mine is three parts water, one part dried beans that have been soaked overnight in whatever bucket we have clean, a handful of allium—onion, garlic, wild leek if Sister found any—and a splash of acid. Vinegar if we have it. Citrus if we're lucky, which is almost never. A few dried chilies if the barter brought some in from the ridge settlements. The base goes on early, before the sun clears the building, and it simmers while we plan the day.

I'm going to give you the recipe now, and I'm going to give it to you flat, no poetry, just the thing itself. This is our base. It's not revolutionary. It's not even a recipe, really. It's a framework. But in this world, a framework is worth more than a recipe, because a framework bends.

The Base

Take your largest pot. Fill it a third full of water. To every two liters of water, add one cup of dried beans—white, red, it doesn't matter, use what you have, provided it isn't moldy or smell wrong. Soak them the night before in a covered vessel. In the morning, drain the soaking water (save it; it's liquid gold for bread, which we'll get to later) and add the beans to the pot. Add one roughly chopped onion, three crushed garlic cloves, a handful of whatever green allium is available, and a tablespoon of salt. If you have dried chilies, crack two open and toss them in. If you have vinegar or citrus, add a tablespoon of the former or the juice of half the latter. Bring to a boil, then drop to a

simmer. Let it go.

This base will become whatever it needs to become. Add stale bread and it's a thick soup. Add scavenged greens and it's a stew. Stretch it with more water and more salt and it's broth for the sick. The base is the beginning. Everything else is negotiation.

The scavengers leave at first light. Knife goes out most days because Knife is the fastest person I've ever seen move through a compromised structure. I don't ask what he did before. Around here, we don't trade in backstories. We trade in skills. Knife can open a locked door with a credit card—when they still worked—and more importantly, he can move through a building without knocking things over. In the old world that was a convenience. Out here, noise is death. A creaking floorboard can bring raiders, and raiders can take everything. Knife learned to walk like water. He flows through rooms, takes what's useful, and leaves without a trace.

He comes back around midmorning usually, with a rucksack that looks pitiful from the outside but turns out to contain the impossible: a bag of sugar that fell behind a shelf, a tin of mustard that rolled under a freezer drawer, a bottle of fish sauce from a Vietnamese grocery that the old world left behind and that we now guard like a national treasure. Fish sauce, if you've never had it, is umami in liquid form. A few drops of it in a pot of beans will make people stop mid-sentence and stare at their bowls with an expression that is part bewilderment, part gratitude. We ration it. Not out of greed, but out of mathematics. One bottle lasts a long time when you use it the way you use perfume: a dab, a trace, an atmosphere.

Sister goes out on different runs. Where Knife is precision, Sister is intuition. She forages. She walks the overgrown lots, the median strips, the parks where ornamental plantings have gone feral and started behaving like their wild ancestors again. She brings back dandelion greens, wood sorrel, plantain leaves—the broad kind, not the banana, though we would eat the banana if we could, God help us. She knows which mushrooms are safe with a certainty that I find both comforting and deeply unsettling, because I have read enough about mycology to understand that confidence in mushroom identification is inversely proportional to your likelihood of survival. But Sister has been doing this for years, and she has never been wrong, and I will take her word over Wikipedia's ghost any day.

"What's the green today?" I ask her some mornings, and she'll say something like, "Chickweed. It's good. It's peppery," and she'll strip the leaves into a bowl while telling a story about a psalm she remembers from her grandmother's church. The psalm is usually about provision, and the greens are usually bitter, and together they make a kind of sermon I can live with.

Ten handles the barter, which is a full-time job I used to think didn't exist. In the old world, we had currency, and currency was abstract, and that abstraction was so

comfortable that we forgot what it represented: trust. Out here, trust is the only currency, and Ten is its most careful banker. He trades for flour from the mill run by a man called Graves in the industrial district. He trades for salt from the coastal settlements that still have access to evaporation ponds. He trades for medical supplies with the clinic uptown, offering labor—our people fixing their roof, hauling water—instead of whatever it is we'd offer if we had money. Ten's ledger is a series of marks on a piece of drywall he pulled from a demolished office. I've asked him to switch to something more portable, but he says the drywall has a certain gravitas that discourages cheating. I don't argue with this.

By the time the morning's haul is in, the base has been simmering for three or four hours. The beans are soft but not mushy. The broth has taken on a color I can only describe as "warm"—it looks the way a kitchen feels when everything is working. This is the moment. This is where the day's ingredients decide what we're making.

I'll give you an example. Last Tuesday—we name our days now, not for their order, but for what happened, because who can keep track of Tuesdays anymore—Knife brought back a crate of canned tomatoes from some supply cache he'd been mapping for weeks. Sister had found a patch of wild fennel growing through the sidewalk on Fifth Street, feathery and defiant. And Ten had completed a trade with a group from the riverside settlement: three pounds of dried pasta in exchange for two jars of our pickled vegetables and a promise to repair their water pump.

I built the meal around what we had. I started the flatbread—more on that in a later chapter, but know this: flatbread is the canvas. It always has been. Flour, water, salt, a splash of oil if we're lucky, worked into a shaggy dough, pressed thin, and cooked on a dry skillet until it blistered. The pasta boiled in salted water with a tablespoon of olive oil. The tomatoes I crushed by hand into the base, added a handful of sugar to cut the acidity, and let it reduce. The fennel I sliced thin and added raw at the end, because it was clean and crisp and the soup needed something that remembered what crunch was.

We served it in bowls—mismatched, some ceramic, some tin, one repurposed hubcap that we only use for emergencies—and we sat at the long table under the tarps while the wind did its best to remind us of the weather we'd lost. Dolores said grace, which she does in a non-denominational way that manages to be both specific and universal, invoking the earth and the hands that fed us and a general sense that things could be worse, which is a philosophy I've grown fond of.

The pasta was good. Not great. The tomatoes had a tinny note that I tried to mask with extra salt and a longer simmer, and the flatbread was too thick on one side because our skillet has a warp in it that we've been meaning to fix since last month. But it was real food, and people ate it, and for a few minutes, the loading dock smelled like something other than survival. It smelled like a kitchen.

I want to talk about the supply chain, because that's a phrase that sounds like it belongs in a textbook, but out here it's a living, fragile thing, as essential and as breakable as a vein.

Our supply chain begins at the scavenge. We have three teams: Knife's crew, which focuses on sealed structures—houses, stores, offices—where things might still be shelf-stable. Sister's crew, which works the open landscape—lots, parks, roadside verges—where anything grows. And the river team, which fishes and collects water and trades with the settlements downstream. Every run is a risk. Every run returns something different. And every return is met with the same question I ask three or four times a day: what do we have?

After the scavenge comes the inventory. We do inventory every morning at what used to be 8:00 AM, which is now just "when the light hits the third pillar." I stand at the table with Ten and we count everything: jars, cans, bags, boxes. We check expiration dates, not because expiration dates are gospel—most of ours are years expired and half of them mean nothing—but because they give us a conversation to have about quality. We open suspicious jars and smell them. We crack suspicious eggs into a separate bowl. We cut mold off cheese with a margin so generous it would make a surgeon blush. We label everything with the date and contents in marker on masking tape, because in this world the only thing worse than losing your food is not knowing what it is.

Then comes the cooking, and after the cooking comes the distribution, and this is where the politics start. Not the loud politics—the quiet kind. The kind that live in the space between "I'm still hungry" and "there isn't any more." We feed everyone who shows up. That's the rule. No one is turned away. But resources are finite, and appetites are not, and so we portion carefully. Adults get a full bowl. Children get a full bowl plus a piece of bread, because children are growing and growing is work. Elderly and sick get broth, which is easier to digest and can be stretched with water without anyone noticing. It's not perfect. It's not even fair, not always. But it's a system, and a system, however flawed, is better than the alternative, which is chaos.

Chaos is what we had in the first months. Chaos is what happens when thirty people all decide they deserve the last can of peaches. Chaos is the sound of a kitchen breaking apart, and I will do anything—counting beans, rationing salt, mediating disputes over portion size—to keep that sound from happening again.

There was a woman who came to us in the early days—maybe the third week—who hadn't eaten in four days. She was walking with the careful, boneless gait of someone whose body has started consuming itself. Her name was Lúcia, and she was a schoolteacher, and she sat at the end of the table and ate three bowls of bean stew without speaking. When she finished, she looked at me with eyes that were both

desperate and suspicious, the way a feral animal looks when you bring it indoors, and she said, "What's the catch?"

"There's no catch," I said. "Just eat."

She didn't believe me. She couldn't. The old world had taught her that everything came with a transaction, a contract, a catch. The new world had confirmed this, because everything we had left had been taken, traded, scavenged, or fought over. The idea of a free meal was more foreign than any unfamiliar food.

I told her there were two rules in this kitchen. Rule one: eat. Rule two: help set up or clean up, if you can. That's it. That's the catch, I suppose, if you want to call it that—the understanding that you are part of this, not separate from it. That the kitchen feeds you, and you feed the kitchen, and if that loop breaks, everyone goes hungry.

Lúcia started peeling garlic the next morning. She's still here. She runs our bread rotation now and has an opinion about every loaf that comes off the skillet, most of them correct. She once told me she'd rather be insulted by her bread than praised by her students, and I thought: that's the last honest thing anyone said about their work before everything fell apart.

I won't tell you the end of the world happened on a specific day. The truth is less cinematic. It happened in stages—shutting downs and breakdowns and shortages that got worse and then got catastrophic and then became the weather we lived in. I was at The Silphium when the first closures hit. Downtown emptied first. Then the suburbs. Then the infrastructure started to fail—water pressure dropping, grids flickering, deliveries stopping. I remember standing in my walk-in cooler, holding a rack of lamb that cost more than some people's monthly earnings now, and listening to the hum of the refrigeration unit. When the hum stopped, I knew. I'd been waiting for it to stop for weeks.

I left with a bag of salt, a knife, a box of matches, and the clothes on my back. The lamb stayed. I've thought about that lamb more times than I'd like to admit, but mostly I think about the salt. The salt made it. The salt is making everything. Salt preserves, salt flavors, salt trades. Salt is the backbone of every recipe in this book, because salt is the backbone of every meal we've made here. Without salt, the beans are just mush, the vegetables are just fiber, the bread is just paste. Salt is what makes food recognizable, what makes it taste like someone cares.

I carry a small pouch of salt in my jacket at all times. It is the most valuable thing I own.

Let me leave you with one more thing before I close this chapter. Yesterday—though

"yesterday" is a soft concept now—I was stirring the base, as I do most mornings, watching the beans break down and the broth thicken and the steam rise in a column that catches whatever light is available. Knife came in from a run carrying, of all things, a small potted herb plant. It was scraggly. It was missing half its leaves. It was alive.

"Basil," he said, and set it on the counter like he was presenting a jewel.

I pinched a leaf and smelled it. The scent cut through everything—the ash of the fire, the damp of the concrete, the metallic tang of the filtered water. It smelled like a garden. It smelled like a kitchen that existed before.

I added the basil to the base, just three leaves, torn small. Forty-three people ate that soup that night, and at least a dozen of them stopped mid-meal and stood very still, as if they'd heard something from far away. I know what they heard. They heard the smell of boiling hope, and they remembered that hope, like basil, is best used fresh, and in small amounts, and never wasted.

We are still here. The stove is still lit. There is food in the pot. That is enough. That is the recipe.
