

Chicken Soup for the Road

by Tony Beckwith © 2000

I WAS TALKING TO MY FRIEND CARLO about our trip to Mexico. “We flew into Monterrey in the smallest plane I’ve ever seen. It was a pencil with wings!”

“We flew into Monterrey once,” Carlo said. “Do you remember?” he asked his wife. She nodded and rolled her eyes. Carlo nodded too. “We took off from San Antonio, tilted back in our seats and pointing straight up at the sky as we climbed to cruising altitude. The plane was shaking and rattling like you wouldn’t believe, and then the overhead storage bins started popping open, one at a time, all the way down the cabin. Nancy’s tray flipped open into her lap and we kinda screamed. Then the door to the cockpit swung open, and two empty beer bottles came rolling and clinking down the aisle.”

I said nothing. Our flight had been nowhere near as dramatic. Carlo went on. “It was the wildest flight we’ve ever taken. Nancy was sure we were going to die. But we got there. Then we found a place in Monterrey that served the best tortilla soup we’ve ever had.”

“It sounds as though Monterrey is a good place for soup,” I said. “We had an excellent chicken consommé at the airport restaurant.”

It was a cold, gray, rainy day when the flying pencil landed, and we had a two-hour layover ahead of us. Lillian and I sat in a booth by the window in the airport restaurant. The window was huge, two floors high and just as wide. We had a panoramic view of the runway. As we waited for our meal, we watched a mechanic

drive a forklift back and forth between two parked airplanes. He wore a heavy coat and gloves, his bare head sunk down on his shoulders. His equipment left tread marks on the shiny, wet tarmac. It looked a lot later than noon out there.

The consommé came in a white bowl, clear chicken broth with



shredded chicken and a bed of rice. The waitress brought some limes and little dishes of chopped onion, radish, cilantro, and avocado, and set them all on the table in front of me. I scattered a couple of spoonfuls of each into the bowl, followed by a generous squeeze of lime. It was a magnificent soup. The broth had a rich, mellow taste, and the garnishes added a pleasing texture and pretty colors as well as their own harmonious flavors. I finished that bowl and

ordered another. When the waitress delivered it she nodded in the direction of the kitchen and said, “The chef says, ‘Thank you.’”

As I raised a spoonful of soup to my mouth, I gazed out of the window. The mechanic was standing quite still on the tarmac, looking at me, and we stared at each other for a second. Then he cocked his head to one side and made an open-palm gesture, as if ushering me into a room. He smiled and I could read his lips as he spoke the words “¡Buen provecho!” I nodded and tipped the spoon into my mouth. “What did he say?” asked Lillian.

When my mouth was empty again I said, “*Buen provecho*. We don’t really have an English word for that, so we use bon appétit.” Lillian waved at the mechanic. He waved back with his big, gloved hand, then turned away and went back to work. It wasn’t long before our flight was called and we were on our way again. We brought the recipe with us:

- 1 whole chicken, boiled and picked
- 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 4 servings of rice, boiled
- 3 cans chicken broth (or equivalent from boiling chicken)
- 8 radishes, finely diced
- 1 avocado, firm, finely cubed
- ½ white onion, finely diced
- 2 tablespoons cilantro, minced
- 1-2 limes, cut in eighths

Bring broth to a boil, add garlic and chicken, and simmer.

Put hot rice in the bowl, cover with broth and chicken.

Add radishes, avocado, onion, and cilantro.

Add lime juice to taste. Serves four.

Buen provecho. ★