

It's four o'clock in the afternoon. My grocery bags are heavy, and the hall is humid from the summer sun. The answering machine light blinks continuously as I unpack the groceries and turn on Bocelli's CD, *Sogno*. I know the message already. I heard it 20 minutes earlier. My parents are working late and leaving me in charge of dinner. After flipping through the cookbook I find a recipe for black bean soup.

My family rarely has elaborate dinners. We would rather spend more time discussing our day than preparing the meal. Still, on occasion, I like making something more exotic than salad and barbecue. I enjoy cooking, especially when the recipe calls for ingredients I don't usually use. The black bean soup caught my attention because it called for lemons.

I recheck the ingredients to make sure I have everything. I put a medium-size pot on top of the stove and fill it midway with water. As the burner lights, small ripples glide across the water. My gaze turns to the onions, and I smirk as I select a knife. Chopped onions rarely make my eyes sting but their oils make my hands smell. Also, the harsh odor burns my sinuses. Still, I cannot resist cooked onions, so I press on with my chopping.

The onion pieces cannot be too tiny or they will float to the top of the soup and overcook. I watch the onion layers collapse in rows with my smooth, vertical cuts. I work on the garlic cloves. Garlic does not have pungent juices, but its inch-thick flaky layers present difficulties. I patiently peel and cut at its skin. The layers of skin gradually thicken as I get closer to the core. I mince the garlic clove into square chunks. Then I slide the garlic and the onion into the pot, the water bubbling and popping as I add the ingredients.

I place two whole lemons on the countertop for later and start to open up two cans of black beans. As the lid opens, I can smell the starch of the juice. As nutritious as beans are, they taste bland alone, similar to eating a teaspoon of fiber supplement. When cooked, beans absorb flavors from the spices and vegetables, and their starchy insides become smooth and savory.

I drain the juice and wash the beans until I see their black skins shine. I blend and mash them, pressing the back of my spoon to the side

of the bowl. The texture is sticky and rough. I add half a cup of liquid from the pot into the mashed beans and watch the consistency change into a creamy sauce. With rough, even strokes, the bean skins are broken up and puréed. I scoop the bean mash into the pot and watch as it thickens the soup.

I take the second can and pour the beans and their purple sauce into the pot. I stir the liquid and watch the water turn a shade of deep violet. The color reminds me of beets. The ingredients blend and create a sweet scent. It still tastes starchy, but the final ingredient, lemons, will give the soup its zesty flavor.

I pick up the lemons, their skin bumpy and slippery under my fingers. I inhale the scent of the rind. The smell is clean and invigorating. I hear an Italian ballad echo out of the CD player. My body tingles from the harmony of the scent and melody. I close my eyes and for a moment, I can see myself walking through a lemon grove in southern Italy.

I cut the first lemon in two parts, and, using my hands, I squeeze the juice into a bowl. The juice is pale yellow, and I can taste the bitterness in its concentrated smell. I pick out the seeds and pour the pale yellow liquid into the soup. The soup's purple tint transforms into a rich brown.

I take the second lemon and turn it on its side. I slice it thickly to make circular lemon garnishes. I reserve six on the side to garnish the bowls, and scatter the rest inside the soup. I lower the heat of the burner and replace the cover on the pot. I leave the soup to simmer.

I busy myself with setting the table, and then prepare the bread. I decided on a French baguette. When dipped in soup, its hard crust prevents it from getting too soggy. The bread is still warm from the bakery as I cut it into pieces. I cover the bread basket with a quilted red napkin and place it on the table.

The soup is fully cooked and upon removing the cover, a blanket of steam skims my face. I taste the soup and find the lemon has balanced its taste. Its creamy texture runs down my throat and warms my body. I taste a bean, and it no longer tastes starchy but instead is sweet with a hint of garlic and onion.

Just as I finish ladling the soup into the bowls, I hear a car pull into the driveway. I add the lemon garnishes to each bowl and turn off the CD player. I wash the onion, garlic, lemon, and mashed bean off my hands just as the lock of the front door turns.