

Granny's Phantastick Soupe

The High Witch Phoebe screamed and hurled the broomstick to the ground, uttering the most fearsome of curses. Toads, black cats and familiars fled in terror. All the owls blinked in outrage.

"A curse on this broomstick! May its brooms always crack and its twine always break and may anyone who rides it fall out of the sky! Except me, of course."

Phoebe was annoyed.

It seemed that a lunar-powered broomstick would not get off the ground. She had been wrestling with the thing all night. Up there, the moon was at its fullest and strongest, fit to burst with sizzling light. You couldn't get much more energy streaming out of it than on a night like this, could you? So what was wrong? The theory was right - after all, if the do-gooders and the not-so-gooders could harness solar energy for going about their business during the day, surely it was not beyond the powers of a High Witch to get the spells and the technology right to harness lunar power? Hm? Hm!?

"Blast you!" she shouted at the unfortunate broomstick, and shook it so furiously that the silver lunar-plates came loose. "Blast you and cast you and curse you and burst you and -!"

"Heavens below, my dear Phoebe!", interrupted a voice from above, "What *are* you doing down there?"

Phoebe groaned. It was her granny, the know-it-all Dowager Witch Delilah. Give us a bright moonlit night, and all the pensioners would get out on their broomsticks and gad about inquiring into other peoples' affairs. Phoebe should have kept quiet.

"Hallo, granny," she said as calmly as she could, "Not really doing anything much. Just trying out a new broomstick..."

"New broomstick, eh? Let's have a look. Don't hold with these new-fangled ones - all plastic and chrome, no style!" Granny Delilah swooped down with an energy which belied her age and hearing-aid. When there was a youngster to be put right, years just fell off her. "Now, what's all this? What on earth have you been up to, Phoebe? Call this a broomstick!?"

Phoebe muttered something which she did not want the Dowager to hear, and which the Dowager did not want to miss.

"Stand back, girl, for badness' sake! Let me have a look - I see, some of this alternative technology, I'll wager. Solar power, is it?"

"Lunar power, actually, and I'll get it working soon."

Delilah fell about cackling, and then had to sit down to catch her breath. "Oh, you'll be the death of me, you youngsters. Lunar energy now! Never heard such a ridiculous idea in all my life! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" The Dowager patted her bosom to get her breath back, and then poked Phoebe hard with her walking stick. "You listen to me, young woman. If you want a broomstick which is environmentally friendly and which goes fast, all you need to do is fuel it with some of Granny Delilah's Phantastick Soupe."

Phoebe looked puzzled. "Soup?"

"No, not '*soup*' - Phantastick Soupe. Is there something wrong with your ears? Have you been washing your hair again? - you know it's unnatural! And you'll get soup in your ears."

"Soup?"

"No, no, no! Not '*soup*', Phantastick Soupe, can't you listen to anything you're told?" Delilah gave her grand-daughter a good prodding with her stick.

"Now you just listen to me - I'll tell you how to make the Soupe, and you'll have the most fuel-efficient broomstick this side of the Black Hill."

Phoebe settled down and the Dowager Witch Delilah explained:

"This is an old recipe, handed down from generation to generation of witches. It gives a most powerful brew. In 1789, a French witch cooked this soup for seven days and seven nights and fed it to her family: not long afterwards, the French Revolution broke out.

"Firstly, it is absolutely essential that your kitchen or cooking area should be carefully prepared. Make sure that nothing can be found easily. Ask a kindly neighbour or warlock to hide spoons in apron pockets, to conceal weighing-scales behind the brooms, to place jugs in the dustbin underneath yesterday's potato peelings. Bowls and pans must be unwashed, so that valuable time is lost when they are needed. Where possible, plan your day to start with a major disaster - ensure, for example, that the owl and the cat get inside your spare hat together, or that you lose your book of spells.

"Ask the milkman to ring the doorbell and demand payments for last week's milk just as you have got everything ready. He should be turned into a slimy toad instantly. I cannot stress this too much - *it is vital* that you get as angry as possible during the preparation and cooking of the Phantastick Soupe!

"Avoid at all costs having all your ingredients to hand. Now, I'm not going to provide you with a list of ingredients, young lady, so don't bother asking me: it is entirely up to you to decide what to put into the pot, and, indeed, if your memory fails you and you cannot remember what has gone in and what has not, so much the better. During preparation, it is best that all *likely* ingredients are still in packets firmly sealed, or in tins that defy all opening-spells or in jars which need the services of the local locksmith.

"Now comes the really interesting stage. Almost at random, weigh out your ingredients - dried peas and lentils, dried vegetables. It is of benefit if dried lentils, in particular, can be carelessly scattered over the floor - this turns the floor into a skating rink, an advantage we shall perceive later. All dried vegetables and pulses should be thrown into the boiling water, and the whole concoction left to boil *unattended* for at least two hours. Remember: a watched pot never boils. A short nap at this stage is often helpful. On your return after that time, you should find the Soupe has boiled over, and is crawling out of the cauldron and be at least halfway towards the door. The cauldron will have boiled dry and the ingredients will have stuck to the bottom. **This is excellent.** In a panic, throw in a good gallon of water.

"Adding more water means that the Soupe will now be too thin, not the kind of thing to put flesh on a grandchild's bones. A thin Soupe is to be avoided!

Therefore, at this stage you must throw caution to the wind and add fistfuls of the original ingredients.

"Next, add carrots, onions, cabbage, leeks and other fresh vegetables. Often, a vegetable-scraping utensil or sharp knife can be lost in the pot and create a sensation later. As an alternative to the onions, add flower bulbs which look much the same and can easily be confused if you have forgotten to polish your spectacles.

"Boil the pottage for another two hours. It is common practice to wander off and listen to the radio, and forget all about the Soupe until clouds of black smoke are seen wafting out over the forest. The cooking-pot will have very little liquid left in it. Remove from the heat, and allow to cool under the light of the stars.

"The following morning, there is still much to be done. You will find large congealed lumps in the pot. These need to be sieved through a sieve or colander (a jelly-bag is no use). Any lumps remaining, or too hard for sieving should on no account be thrown away. Keep them for casting good powerful spells, or pelting at policemen. Once the Phantastick Soupe has been strained, there is no harm in re-boiling it for at least another hour. At the end of this time, it is traditional to smite yourself on the forehead, exclaiming "*Dearie me, but I've forgotten the salt!*". Grab the salt container, up-end it over the soup, and allow the entire contents to fall in. **Do not stir!!** Use a ladle to remove the excess salt (usually a pound or two). Remember, salt is good for you.

"Finally, simmer gently for 20 minutes."

"Have you got a note of all that, my girl?" asked the old witch, glancing sharply at Phoebe. The girl nodded and scribbled fiercely.

"The Soupe is now ready. Since cooking times will vary according to the fierceness of the flames, you may wish to keep the coven waiting for up to an hour. While away the time with games of *Snap!* or endless tales of your youth. This always whets the appetite. Do not, on any account, permit young children to eat it immediately. It could be scalding hot (this is uncommon). Even if it is luke-warm, however, children should be sent out for a long walk at this point, partly to improve their complexions, which are always too rosy, partly to ensure that the Soupe becomes stone-cold. Adults, on the other hand, must eat it without delay, and you will find that scarcely anyone will swallow more than a spoonful.

"You will be left with almost an entire cauldron full of the Phantastick Soupe. This is a fine excuse for feeling hurt and rejected. Your family will then feel dreadful and be nice to you for days afterwards.

"And then," said the Dowager Witch triumphantly, giving Phoebe a good hearty poke, "And then you will have a Phantastick Soupe, so full of heat and energy, of anger and lentils, of guilty feelings and of pent-up annoyance that it would power a wizard's castle to the moon if required. Oh yes, I've seen that done in my day. When I was young, I used to see a lot of a young man named Bill. I used to make him some Soupes you'd never believe. Oh, what a handsome chap he was..." Granny Delilah subsided into fond memories for a moment. Phoebe hurriedly finished her notes.

"Ah my, but that's all in the past now. Don't know what became of Bill the Wizard. So, have you got all that, young lady? Did you note it all down? Or have you not been listening?"

"Oh no, I've been listening. But it sounds a bit complicated...?"

"Pah! Complicated? You don't know what complicated is? You young folks, you just want everything to fall into your lap! Just tell me this, is it more complicated than trying to get your lunatic-energy panels to work?"

Phoebe sighed. "All right, then, I'll try it. Thanks, Granny."

Delilah looked pleased with herself. "That's my bad little girl," she said, tapping Phoebe firmly on the upper arm. "Now, all you need to do is brew the Phantastick Soup, and then dip your broom in it. You'll leave all the other witches standing! And when you're out on your first Soupe-powered trip, don't forget to call in one me, will you?"