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Simple spring soups

Take a cue from the French to prepare these vegetable soups

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Living with a family in Provence during a college semester abroad, I had my first exposure to the French-grandmother school of soup making.

We had soup several times a week, always pureed and always delicious. When asparagus flooded the market, we had asparagus soup. When Madame made a good buy on mushrooms, we had mushroom soup. When all the refrigerator yielded was cauliflower and some boiled potatoes, we had cauliflower soup, and it was delicious beyond imagination.

It didn't take long to realize that all these nourishing soups derived from a similar template: A knob of butter went into the pot, followed by some chopped leeks or onion and perhaps some minced garlic. After this aromatic base had softened, in went the featured vegetable and some good chicken broth.

If a stray turnip or two lurked in the vegetable bin, or there were some leftover cooked carrots, they went into the pot, too. A potato or some rice might be added for thickening, and the contents would be simmered until tender, then pureed. A little cream could boost the body, or thin soups might be poured over toast.

These were endlessly fascinating soups to me, models of daily resourcefulness. Sometimes multiple flavors merged and you knew Grandma had really ransacked the fridge, but the happy effect was like the interplay of a string quartet. On other days, the aroma of peas or turnips would rise solo from the bowl, a scent as pure, clear and focused as a great tenor's high notes.

I'm always reminded of these soups in spring, at the sight of fresh white turnips with their paper-thin skins, slender green garlic and sweet new carrots. I can mentally taste the delicious soups they will make, and with the French-grandmother method, I know that a good dinner is only 30 minutes away.

Use the following recipes to master the template and build your soup-making confidence, then let the market and your whims be your guide.

A few pointers

The stock:

-- Homemade chicken or vegetable stock is best. Make a big batch on the weekend and freeze it in quart containers.

The foundation

-- Lay your aromatic foundation: In your chosen fat, saute your choice of chopped onion, shallot, leek, spring onion, green garlic and/or garlic. Cook until softened.

The vegetables

-- Add your vegetables, trimmed and chopped. Figure on about 1 1/2 pounds of vegetables to 4 cups of stock. If you add a thickener like rice, as in the asparagus soup, you'll need more stock.

-- Mix complementary vegetables: peas and turnips; carrots and celery root; spinach and fennel. If you have leftover cooked vegetables that would harmonize, add them near the end of the cooking time. They only need to heat through.

-- Green vegetables such as asparagus and peas will keep their color better if you cook them uncovered.

The technique

-- Better to make your puree too thick than too thin. You can always adjust a thick soup with stock.

-- A blender does a better job of pureeing than a food processor, although a processor will work. When pureeing, put the solids into the blender jar or work bowl first, then add just enough liquid to make a thick puree. With the motor running, add more liquid until the soup is the consistency you like.

Substitutions

-- A little half-and-half, cream or creme fraiche can add richness and body but is rarely essential. If you are fat-conscious, leave it out.

-- I prefer the flavor of butter in most of these soups, but you can substitute olive oil.

Sweet Pea & Green Garlic Soup

Sweet peas are essential in this recipe, adapted from my book, "Fresh from the Farmers' Market" (Chronicle Books, 1997). If you can only get starchy peas, don't bother.

INGREDIENTS:

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus more for garnish
3 cups thinly sliced green garlic, white and pale green part only
3 cups shelled English peas (from about 3 pounds unshelled peas)
4 cups chicken or vegetable stock, or more as needed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
8 slices day-old baguette
1 garlic clove, halved

INSTRUCTIONS:

Heat olive oil in a large pot over moderately low heat. Add the green garlic and saute 10 minutes, then cover and steam, stirring occasionally, until the garlic is soft, about 5 more minutes.

Add peas and 2 1/2 cups broth. Bring to a simmer, adjust heat to maintain a gentle simmer and cook, uncovered, until peas are just tender, 5 to 10 minutes.

In a blender, puree half the soup until smooth. Return the pureed half to the pot and add enough broth to achieve the consistency you like. Season with salt and pepper and reheat gently.

Toast the baguette slices until lightly colored. Rub one side with the cut side of the garlic. Drizzle with olive oil.

Divide soup among warm bowls, topping each portion with a couple of toasts.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 340 calories, 12 g protein, 34 g carbohydrate, 19 g fat (3 g saturated), 1 mg cholesterol, 102 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

Creamy Turnip & Turnip Greens Soup

For best flavor, seek out the small white turnips known as Tokyo turnips for this recipe. They are usually about 1 1/2 inches in diameter, mild and sweet, and so thin-skinned that you don't need to peel them.

INGREDIENTS:

1 pound small turnips, with very fresh greens attached

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus more for garnish
1 cup thinly sliced leeks, white and pale green part only
1 large clove garlic, minced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
Approximately 4 cups chicken or vegetable stock

INSTRUCTIONS:

Separate the turnips from their greens. Trim the greens, removing tough stems, and wash well. Peel turnips unless they are thin-skinned. (Tokyo turnips -- see introduction -- do not require peeling.) Quarter the turnips, or cut larger ones into six wedges.

Melt the butter in a large saucepan over moderate heat. Add the leeks and saute until softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the garlic and saute briefly to release its fragrance. Add the turnips, season with salt and pepper, and stir to coat with the butter. Add 3 cups stock and bring to a simmer. Cover and adjust heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook until the turnips are almost tender, about 15 minutes.

Stir in the turnip greens, cover and cook until the greens are tender, about 5 minutes.

Puree the soup in batches in a blender. Strain through a sieve, if desired, to remove any threadlike shreds of turnip greens. Return to a clean saucepan and stir in enough additional stock to thin soup to desired consistency. Adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Reheat soup. Divide among warm bowls. Top each portion with a slice of butter.

Serves 4

PER SERVING: 115 calories, 5 g protein, 12 g carbohydrate, 6 g fat (4 g saturated), 17 mg cholesterol, 69 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

Celery Root, Mushroom & Potato Soup

Celery root darkens quickly upon exposure to air, so don't peel it until the last minute, and put it in the stock immediately. The flavors of celery root and mushroom are highly complementary.

INGREDIENTS:

2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup thinly sliced leeks, white and pale green part only
1/2 pound peeled celery root (celeriac), in 3/4-inch dice
1/2 pound white mushrooms, quartered or in sixths if large
1/2 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled, in 3/4-inch dice
4 cups chicken or vegetable stock

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Whisked creme fraiche for garnish

Thinly sliced chives for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS:

Melt the butter in a large saucepan over moderate heat. Add the leeks and saute until softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the celery root, mushrooms, potatoes and stock. Bring to a simmer. Cover and adjust heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook until the vegetables are tender, about 20 minutes.

Puree the soup in batches in a blender. Return to a clean saucepan and reheat. Season with salt and pepper. Divide among warm bowls, garnishing each portion with a drizzle of creme fraiche (drizzle it directly from the whisk or from a squeeze bottle) and a sprinkle of chives.

Serves 4 to 6

PER SERVING: 115 calories, 5 g protein, 15 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (2 g saturated), 11 mg cholesterol, 45 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

Asparagus Soup with Chervil

Cooking the asparagus uncovered helps to preserve its color. If you can't find chervil, substitute half as much Italian parsley.

INGREDIENTS:

2 pounds asparagus

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 cup thinly sliced spring onion or leeks, white and pale green part only

1/3 cup Arborio or other short-grain rice

6 cups chicken or vegetable stock, or more as needed

1/4 cup minced fresh chervil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Whisked creme fraiche for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS:

Holding an asparagus spear in both hands, bend it gently; it will break naturally at the point at which the spear becomes tough. Repeat with remaining spears. You should have about 1 1/4 pounds trimmed asparagus. Discard the tough ends.