

SIMMERING

SINGLE VEGETABLE SOUPS

These should invariably be elegant of flavour but many of today's vegetable varieties are so tasteless you can't rely on a good result. Be prepared to be creative. A little leek makes a big and useful difference to most vegetables but if you must use onion cook it long enough to become sweet before you add any other vegetable. The problem with using large amounts of onion is that fennel soup becomes fennel and onion soup, the pumpkin is pumpkin and onion etc etc.

An excellent way to add further interest to a single vegetable soup is to serve them with a chunky salsa of some kind in the middle; the very simplest and which seems to go with any vegetable soup is some crisp bacon, coarsely chopped parsley and perhaps a little garlic folded into thick soured cream. Dollop this on at the very last minute.

Summery vegetables are very suited to making chilled soups. One of the best is a pea soup, which is all the better for the addition of lemon juice to counter act its sweetness; a great trick with this is to dribble in sparkling wine or champagne just as you serve, and thus a fizzing green foam is created. Very gala and, to some, rather alarming.

MIXED ROOT-VEGETABLE SOUPS

The earth's the limit. Any root vegetable mixes well with others, as doublets, triplets or a bit of everything you fancy. Carrot, swede and turnip or parsnip is always a good and hearty mix. Potato is always an option but keep it minimal. If you want to serve a rugged mixture where you can identify the vegetables, say a mix of potatoes, leeks and carrots, a waxy potato is best: for a pureed soup a starchy potato does the trick. Note that onion is NOT necessary. Apples and pears are very useful in these soups as are tomatoes and the honey sweetness of sweet potato and kumara.

ROASTED VEGETABLE SOUPS

This takes longer than other vegetable soups because you have to roast the vegetables first. To be exact you aren't roasting but baking – roasting means in front of an open fire. Whatever. The concentration given by the roasting is remarkably good and reliable and any caramellisation which might have been encouraged is only a good thing. Any combination works and this is a chance to include onion, banana shallots or red onion ideally, which have baked with the other vegetables for an hour or more to become sweet and syrupy: you can begin these soups much more swiftly by first cooking the vegetables in the microwave and then roasting or grilling them

Roasted sweet onion, leek and kumara sharpened with a little lime zest, perhaps? Roasted beetroot and red capsicum? Roasted parsnip and carrot – or just roasted capsicum or roasted carrot? You can always include tomato or garlic in the baking pan too.

To allow for shrinkage and concentration, you should begin with at least 1kg of raw vegetables to make six servings.

BROWN FRENCH ONION SOUP

There is a creamy, white onion soup but the better-known golden brown onion soup is inevitably linked with the long-gone Central Parisian markets, Les Halles, where it was the early-morning lifeblood of the workers. This elixir is commonly served over toasted bread slices on which cheese is melted. Thus each spoonful deposits gobbled strings of congealed cheese on everything it passes from plate to palate – if it gets there at all. I have never understood where the pleasure was supposed to be.

How to do it:

For four people soften and sweeten four big sliced brown onions in two tablespoons of oil or butter in a covered pan.. Only after a long wait, perhaps up to 40 minutes, should you take ioff the lid, turn up the heat a little and then go on to brown them, just as gently – you are caramellising, not burning – and you must be watching and turning all the time. Stir in a tablespoon of flour, let this cook for a few minutes and then add four cups of clear beef stock or consommé. This is the perfect time to rely on the supermarket shelf for clear beef consommé; this is one time never to think of doing something clever with stock cubes.

Reheat gently, stirring, and voila. Richer, darker and so much better looking than the others, this *soupe a l'oignon* appreciates a soupcon of cognac added at the last minute. Some Madeira or sweet sherry also does nicely. You can thicken it with egg yolks, but most people do not bother. Good bread or thick toast served beside the soup plate is just as good as a cheesey-toastey thing in it. Better really.

Increasing Your Repertoire:

- Tip in a glass of white wine.
- Add to it richly, by serving each portion over a soft-poached egg
- Add wonderful green vegetables, mangetouts, sugar snaps, thin beans, little zucchini, all sliced and hot and crisp from the microwave.
- Make something oriental of it, by adding at the last moment little sticks of fresh ginger and of lemon grass and/or Kaffir lime leaf

- Add cubes of cooked potato, matchsticks of red capsicum and sprinklings of smoked paprika – or push friendships by also cooking whole cloves of garlic in the soup, after you have added the consommé to the onions.
- A handful of mixed fresh herbs, like coriander, parsley, fennel, mint and thyme with the merest hint of rosemary and a leaf or two of sage is hard to beat for fragrance and gratification. Thinly sliced nasturtium leaves alone is great, and in autumn you might hurl in a handful of rosemary flowers – ask the person you least want in the kitchen to do the collecting as it takes some time. Chive, thyme or marjoram flowers do as nicely.
- Still hanker for that cheese? Instead of cheeses which string, crumble some nice blue cheese - salty Roquefort ideally- into each serving. That's your fat intake for the day sorted, but you might just think it worthwhile

BARLEY/PULSE BROTHS

Who doesn't like barley broths? Not many, that's for sure, but the problem is that they are so often made with bacon or ham bones which have not been blanched, and are thus far saltier than is recommended. If you want to include a ham or bacon bone always blanch it well; start in cold water, bring very slowly to the boil and then simmer for five minutes. Drain and then add the bone to the soup. There are very few occasions when using a really good vegetable or chicken stock won't do quite as well, particularly when they have been really reduced to make their flavour zing.

My younger brother Ross, to whom making a good thick soup comes second only to excelling at golf, has reluctantly revealed to me that his essential ingredient in barley broths is split peas, and not any old yellow ones, but the green ones. These and not barley are what give body and texture to the soup he reckons. His boss used to cook the dried peas separately and add them to his barley broth as a puree. The things men talk about in private.

Like me, and like so many collected European soup recipes, Ross also prefers thinly sliced leeks to onion in his soups. It's gospel that other vegetables should be grated, making it easy to incorporate their tasty skins and also because they dissolve more readily to yield that coveted velvety texture, nuggeted with barley grains. The more grated vegetables you use, the less you need a meat stock, as they make a vegetable stock as they go. Fresh or canned corn kernels are Ross's quirky but good addition - they somehow retain their ability to explode squeakily in your mouth. My contribution is to pan-roast the barley before it is used, but as I too use a soup mix I don't do this very often.

How to do it:

For eight or more servings

250g/8oz soup mix which includes barley

250g/8oz dried green split peas

2 big old carrots

a leek or an onion

a couple of starchy potatoes.

All you do is to incorporate the peas into the soup mix and put them into a large saucepan. Grate the carrots onto this, slice the leek finely or grate the onion and then slice the peeled potatoes thinly on the mandoline blade of the grater. I sometimes add celery stalks, destringed and finely sliced.

Add plenty of water or stock and a blanched ham hock or any bones you might have chosen to use and then simmer for an hour or so, watching it doesn't get too thick and burn before it is ready. Season only after all the grains are tender.

Better if left until the next day. The best way to reheat thick soups like this is in the microwave, so you avoid any burn risk.

Pressure cooker method: the thing to avoid is making the soup so thick it burns. Better to start it in the pressure cooker with plenty of water, and then to cook it on conventionally. So put in the soup mix and barley and a litre of water or stock and cook at High pressure for 20 minutes. Cool the cooker quickly under running cold water and then decide to give it another 10 minutes under pressure or to let it sit simmering and thickening without a cover for another hour.