

Hearty Minestrone

From the episode: *Easier Italian Favorites*

Serves 6 to 8

If you are pressed for time you can "quick-brine" your beans. In step 1, combine the salt, water, and beans in a large Dutch oven and bring to a boil over high heat. Remove the pot from the heat, cover, and let stand 1 hour. Drain and rinse the beans and proceed with the recipe. We prefer cannellini beans, but navy or great Northern beans can be used. We prefer pancetta, but bacon can be used. To make this soup vegetarian, substitute vegetable broth for chicken broth and 2 teaspoons of olive oil for the pancetta. Parmesan rind is added for flavor, but can be replaced with a 2-inch chunk of the cheese. In order for the starch from the beans to thicken the soup, it is important to maintain a vigorous simmer in step 3. The soup can be cooled, covered tightly, and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Reheat it gently and add basil just before serving.

INGREDIENTS

Table salt

1/2 pound dried cannellini beans (about 1 cup), rinsed and picked over (see note)

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil , plus extra for serving

3 ounces pancetta , cut into 1/4-inch pieces (see note)

2 medium celery ribs , cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 3/4 cup)

1 medium carrot , peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 3/4 cup)

2 small onions , peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 1 1/2 cups)

1 medium zucchini , trimmed and cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 1 cup)

2 medium garlic cloves , minced or pressed through garlic press (about 2 teaspoons)

1/2 small head green cabbage , halved, cored, and cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 2 cups) (see step by step below)

1/8 - 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes

8 cups water

2 cups low-sodium chicken broth

1 piece Parmesan cheese rind , about 5 by 2 inches (see note)

1 bay leaf

1 1/2 cups V8 juice

1/2 cup chopped fresh basil leaves

Ground black pepper

Grated Parmesan cheese , for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Dissolve 1 1/2 tablespoons salt in 2 quarts cold water in large bowl or container. Add beans and soak at room temperature for at least 8 hours and up to 24 hours. Drain and rinse well.

2. Heat oil and pancetta in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until pancetta is lightly browned and fat has rendered, 3 to 5 minutes. Add celery, carrot, onions, and zucchini; cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables are softened and lightly browned, 5 to 9 minutes. Stir in garlic, cabbage, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and red pepper flakes; continue to cook until cabbage starts to wilt, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Transfer vegetables to rimmed baking sheet and set aside.

3. Add soaked beans, water, broth, Parmesan rind, and bay leaf to now-empty Dutch oven and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat and vigorously simmer, stirring occasionally, until beans are fully tender and liquid begins to thicken, 45 to 60 minutes.

4. Add reserved vegetables and V8 juice to pot; cook until vegetables are soft, about 15 minutes. Discard bay leaf and Parmesan rind, stir in chopped basil, and season with salt and pepper. Serve with olive oil and grated Parmesan.

TECHNIQUE

HAVE A V8

Though completely nontraditional, V8 juice trumped all the other types of tomato products we tried in our soup. It added just the right amount of bright tomato taste with an even bigger wallop of vegetable flavor—the real goal of our recipe. We're surprised the Italians didn't think of it first.

VEGGIE POWER



TECHNIQUE

TO THICKEN SOUP, BOIL YOUR BEANS

For our Hearty Minestrone recipe, we cook the dried beans in chicken broth and water before combining them with the other ingredients. We noticed that by the time the beans became tender, the cooking liquid in some batches of beans had a nice thick consistency, while others were thin and watery. Could this be due to how much heat was under the pot?

EXPERIMENT

To find out, we cooked two pots of beans (both soaked first overnight in a brine, according to our recipe)—one at a bare simmer and the second pot at a vigorous simmer—until the beans in each became tender. We then drained each batch of cooking liquid into a measuring cup, adding water to the vigorously simmered batch until it was level with the gently simmered cooking liquid.

RESULTS

Even with water added to compensate for evaporation, the cooking liquid from the boiled beans was significantly thicker than the more gently simmered liquid.

EXPLANATION

A higher cooking temperature causes more starch to be released from beans. As they simmer, their coats may look smooth and unbroken, but starches are continually being released into the water through a section of their seed coat called the "hilum." These starches absorb the hot liquid and eventually burst, releasing the molecule amylose, which acts as a thickener. So the next time you want a thicker bean soup, remember: The more vigorous the simmer, the more starches that burst and the more viscous the broth.

TECHNIQUE

CUTTING CABBAGE INTO PIECES

To cut a head of cabbage into evenly sized pieces for recipes such as Hearty Minestrone, use the following method.

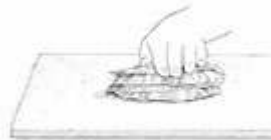
1. Cut the cabbage into quarters, then cut away the hard piece of core attached to each quarter.



2. Separate the cored cabbage into stacks of leaves and flatten them by pressing lightly with your hands.



3. Using a chef's knife, cut each stack lengthwise into 1/2-inch-wide strips.



4. Gather the strips into bundles and cut them crosswise into 1/2-inch pieces.



TECHNIQUE

MAKING THICKER, MORE FLAVORFUL MINISTRONE

1. BRINE BEANS

Brine beans overnight in 2 quarts water and 1 1/2 tablespoons salt.



2. SAUTÉ VEGETABLES

Sauté vegetables and remove them before cooking beans to preserve their texture.



3. COOK BEANS

Cook beans at vigorous simmer to release their starch which will act as thickener.



4. ADD VEGETABLES

Return vegetables to pot, along with V8 juice and chopped fresh basil leaves.



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