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Party squash soup (usa imperial version)

main courses

I like to think of this as a happy soup. The amazing heat from the chile will really get your endorphins going and the rice is so comforting. It's just what you need in the cold winter months. The secret to making it so good is to really work the seasoning at the end, and pimp it up with some beautiful fresh lime juice. You can vary it by using noodles instead of rice, or adding some pulled chicken or sweetcorn, but as it stands, this is a great veggie dish.

Get a high-sided pan or wok on a medium-high heat to get nice and hot, and pour your broth into a small pan on a low heat to get warm. To make your fragrant soup base, add the lime leaves, chillies, garlic, ginger, lemongrass and a pinch of salt to a food processor. Chop the top few leaves off your bunch of coriander and pop to one side, then add the rest to the processor and blitz for 30 seconds or so until fairly fine. With the processor still running, add a few good lugs of olive oil, the five-spice and ground cumin. Tip this mixture straight into your hot pan, you can add a splash of broth to loosen it if you want, and fry and stir for a couple of minutes so it starts smelling fantastic. Add your sliced onion, then cook gently for 8 to 10 minutes.

Add the squash to the pan and stir well, then pour in the broth. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 20 to 25 minutes until the squash is lovely and soft. At this point, add the rice and give it a really good stir. If it looks a bit dry, you can add a splash of water here. Continue to simmer for about 8 minutes until the rice is almost cooked, then add the coconut milk and bring back to the boil. Simmer for a couple of minutes until hot through and thickened a little. I like to squash up some of the squash at this point too.

Take the pan off the heat, give it a good stir, then taste and season carefully with salt and pepper. To give it a bit of twang add the lime juice – the amount you need will depend on how juicy your limes are, so keep tasting it as you go. Scatter with more sliced fresh chili and your reserved coriander leaves before serving.

ingredients

- 5 cups chicken or vegetable broth, preferably free-range or organic
- 6-7 lime leaves
- 3 fresh red chillies, deseeded
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 large thumb-sized piece of fresh ginger, peeled
- 3 sticks of lemongrass, trimmed and squashed with the back of a knife
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- a small bunch of fresh coriander
- olive oil
- 1 heaped teaspoon five-spice
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 onion, peeled and finely sliced
- 1 large butternut or acorn squash, halved, deseeded and cut into 1 inch chunks
- 7 ounces basmati rice, washed
- 2 x 14-ounce cans coconut milk
- Juice of 3-4 limes
- Optional: 1 fresh red chili, finely sliced

If you're making this for a party, what I like to do is to hack the top off a massive pumpkin, scoop out the insides, then bake the shell in the oven for 40 minutes at 220°F. You can then use this as a receptacle for your hot soup, and as long as it's an inch or so thick, it should keep warm for a good hour or so. Have it sitting out at the party with a load of little cups and bowls lined up next to it and a bunch of lime wedges, and let everyone help themselves!

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