



THE OPTIMAL KITCHEN

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HEARTY WINTER SOUPS AND STEWS

Soup is a great way to get all the vegetables your body needs this time of year when the variety of fresh produce dwindles and the price goes up. Soup is economical and ensures that you never have any wasted food that you throw out, instead use it to make a delicious soup. For those with families, it is a great way to cram in a bunch of veggies without kids really noticing. Even better, statistics show that people who begin their meal with a cup of soup consume 10% fewer calories at that meal than their non-soup eating counter parts.

What makes soup such an economical way to eat healthy is: first, it's a great way to use up forgotten produce in your refrigerator that has seen better days, second, since the vegetables cook in the broth or stock all of the nutrients that leech out, and often are tossed with the steaming water, gets incorporated into your soup, lastly, making a huge pot of soup once a week will provide not just a dinner but several lunches to enjoy. Better yet invite over some friends and have everyone bring an ingredient, toss them together in a single pot and have your own stone soup party!

An even better way to save money when making soup is to make your own stock which is a bit time consuming but very easy. Simply save all vegetable scraps, carrot peels, onion skins, celery tops, whatever you would normally throw in the compost heap, instead throw in a container and store in the freezer; you can also save chicken and fish bones which add a variety of health boosting vitamins and minerals. When you have enough to fill your large stockpot, take them out, put them in the pot, cover with water and place over a low/medium heat. The key to a nice clear stock is to never let it boil, once your stock boils it will release certain proteins which will cloud the broth, which does not affect the nutrient value but your soup won't be as pretty.

With Soup being one of the favorite comfort foods of winter it only makes sense to incorporate more homemade soups into your weekly meal planning. Soups need not be complicated and they are a great way to experiment and try out new herbs and flavors. Follow some simple rules and you'll be sure to have a steaming tasty pot of soup whenever you like.

Here are some of my other favorite recipes for hearty soups which are really more like stews. They are easy to prepare and use healthy inexpensive ingredients, many of which you might have already so they will undoubtedly become some of your favorite winter meals.

Mushrooms are a vegetable that fall in a variety of categories as far as the health properties they contain. Japanese varieties like Enochi and Maitake have beneficial compounds that aid health. Even more conventional varieties like shitake and poyster have healing compound and are well worth getting into your diet. Even better they are meaty in texture and full of fiber making them an ideal food for those shifting to a plant based diet.

MUSHROOM BARLEY

1lb assorted mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
2 onions, minced
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 ribs of celery, finely chopped
1 cup barley
1 sprig of rosemary, thyme or parsley or a combination
1 quart + vegetable stock
olive oil for cooking

1. saute onions until clear and then add garlic, celery and mushrooms and cook until soft
2. add stock and bring to a low boil, add barley and simmer for an additional 25-30 mins, add more stock if necessary
3. add fresh herbs and season with salt and pepper before serving

INDONESIAN GROUND NUT STEW

1 onion minced
3 garlic cloves minced
1 inch pice of fresh ginger minced
1 cup all natural peanut butter
1 28 ounce can crushed tomatoes
½ tsp cayenne
1 large can chick peas, rinsed
2 cups peeled, cubed butternut squash (or other winter squash)
1 quart vegetable stock
olive oil for cooking

1. saute onions, garlic and ginger until soft, add peanut butter and stir well
2. add tomatoes and cayenne and continue to stir until tomatoes and peanut butter

- are combined thoroughly
3. add butternut chunks and cook for about 5 mins, then add chickpeas
 4. cover with stock and simmer for 20 mins until squash is tender
 5. serve as is or over rice

Orange vegetables are an important disease fighter this time of year. This soup is a great way to ensure you get all the Beta Carotene your body needs to fight off infection. This soup combines a wide variety of orange vegetables to make sure your body gets all it needs to be a disease fighting powerhouse.

WINTER BISQUE

1 medium onion cut into chunks
1 inch chunk of ginger, grated or minced
1 lb carrots washed and cut into 1" chunks
1 lb peeled sweet potato cut into chunks
1 lb butternut squash cubes
1 tbs yellow curry powder
1 tsp garam masala
1-2 quarts broth
olive oil for cooking

1. saute onions in a bit of oil, 2 tsp is enough, for a minute or so and then add the carrots
2. cook for a few minutes adding broth if necessary
3. add the sweet potatoes and squash and saute for a few more minutes
4. cover vegetables with broth and once it comes to a boil reduce to a low simmer
5. cook until the carrots are soft (they are the hardest vegetable and take the longest time)
6. let cool a bit and then using an immersion blender, blend until smooth; you can also do in batches in your food processor or your blender

Soup has a significant therapeutic value that goes beyond simply the ingredients. There is a comfort and warmth that soup provides the body that is simply unmatched by any other foods. Soups are nourishing to the body and soul but even better as prices rise on produce as they inevitably do every winter, learning to make delicious homemade soups will ensure you not only eat all your veggies this winter season but you won't break the bank while doing it.