


SOUP STARS

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Roasted Squash Soup: What's more comforting than a steaming bowl of roasted squash soup with apple, pear and blue cheese?

When the weather turns damp and chilly, is there anything more comforting than a steaming bowl of soup? I love soup and there's nothing I enjoy more than inviting friends over for a smorgasbord of soup, a soupfest if you will, that's as delicious as it is warming. Forget about fussing with delicate appetizers and fretting over what goes with this and that. With a few pots of soup warming on the stove, you'll need little else but a couple of baguettes and a bottle of wine to take off the chill. Dessert? An assortment of cheese and some ripe juicy pears will do nicely. I'm talking casual, cozy-sweater kind of entertaining.

Mastering soup is one of those practical life skills; when soup is part of your cooking repertoire, you'll never want for a nourishing meal. You'll learn to transform all those leftovers in the fridge into something inspired and fresh: chicken pot pie filling becomes a luscious chicken soup with rice and lemon; roasted corn is transformed into a sweet and silky purée; braised lamb is tossed into minestrone. The variations are endless. I've included three of my favourite soup recipes to get you started.

The key to good soup lies in its very foundation – the stock – and homemade stock makes for the tastiest soup. I'm not suggesting you can't make perfectly good soup with the boxed variety. You can, but you'll notice a big difference when you use your own stock. It's like comparing butter to margarine; they both do the trick but one is much tastier (and better for you) than the other.

“Soup is ideal for casual, cozy sweater kind of entertaining.”



You may consider making stock too time-consuming, but it's mostly a hands-off affair once you have everything in your stockpot. For some, preparing stock is an annual event with the holiday turkey carcass tossed into a pot of water with some onions, carrots, and celery. There's nothing wrong with that method, but if you really want to boost the flavour of your stock, use raw meaty bones that are still full of flavour. Go a step further and roast the bones before you add them to the pot and you'll have an incomparable, rich, roasted stock high in umami (chef-speak for that elusive taste sensation referred to as savoury or pure yumminess).

I've included a recipe for an easy roasted chicken stock. You'll want to make enough to stash extra in the freezer because good stock is the secret behind a myriad of dishes, including braised meat, risottos and just about every sauce imaginable. Having it on hand will amp up the flavour of your food appreciably.

Infusing minestrone with smoky kielbasa sausage and a hunk of savoury Parmesan rind (yet another source of umami) gives this soup loads of depth and flavour. Pasta is cooked separately and added just before serving because who wants swollen soggy pasta in their soup? I garnish the minestrone with freshly chopped spinach (no cooking required), shaved Parmesan and a piquant dollop of pistou made of jalapeño peppers, lime, raw shallots and cilantro.

Apples, pears and squash are a flavourful trio and luscious when blended into a silky purée. The roasted squash soup is finished with a tangy blue cheese cream and topped with roasted squash seeds.

No soup repertoire is complete without a classic French onion soup. This heady soup is made of slowly caramelized onions, deglazed with cognac and finished with a slice of crusty bread with a generous melting of Gruyere cheese on top. It's a meal in itself.

Once you've mastered stocks and soup, you'll be heading off to the market, sans recipe, to create your own soupfest. Soup's on! B.Y.O.B. (Bring Your Own Bowl).

WINE PAIRING

An excellent match to soup can often be found in Sherry. Higher alcohol creates a textural contrast that makes the pairing interesting. Look for dryer Finos for the **French Onion**, and echo the **Roasted Squash** with a nuttier Palo Cortado, or slightly sweeter style, like Oloroso. The briny finish and acidity make them very food friendly. For the **Minestrone**, I would look for a light and fruity Chianti - juicy, bright and red fruited to match the tomato base. —Treve Ring

The secret to this heady French onion soup is the slow caramelized onions and dark roasted chicken stock.



Minestrone gets a vibrant kick from a zesty jalapeño and lime pistou.



FIND THE RECIPES ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES



MINISTRONE SOUP WITH PISTOU

I always make a huge batch of minestrone because it's a crowd pleaser and it freezes beautifully. You can easily halve the recipe and tinker with the ingredients; there are no rules with this soup, so get creative! *Makes 12 servings.*

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| 2 onions, chopped | 1-1 1/2 lbs (453-680 grams) smoky kielbasa sausage |
| 4 slices of bacon, chopped | 4 ripe tomatoes or 1 can (14.5 ounces) of plum tomatoes |
| 2 Tbsp olive oil, plus more as needed | 1 1/2 cups dry navy beans, soaked and precooked |
| 2-3 cups green cabbage, finely chopped | 1 bundle of fresh thyme and parsley stems, tied with kitchen string |
| 2 cloves of garlic, minced | 2 bay leaves |
| 3 carrots, peeled and diced | Parmesan rind, if available |
| 10 cups roasted chicken stock, preferably homemade | |

GARNISHES

- 1 1/2 cups of small pasta shells, cooked separately
- 1/2 cup of Parmesan cheese, shaved with a vegetable peeler
- 1 bunch fresh spinach, chopped
- Pistou (recipe below)

In a large pot, sauté onions and bacon in oil until the onions are translucent and the bacon is cooked through. Add the cabbage and sauté it in the rendered fat at medium-high heat for about 5 minutes, or until the cabbage takes on a bit of colour. (The browning of the cabbage adds to the flavour.) Add the garlic, carrots and celery and mix well, being mindful that garlic burns quickly. If there is excess fat in the pan, remove it with a spoon before adding the stock, kielbasa, tomatoes, cooked beans, herbs, bay leaves and Parmesan rind (if using).

Simmer the soup until the cabbage and the carrots are just tender, but not overcooked. Adjust the seasoning with additional salt, if required. Remove the herb bundle and the bay leaves.

Just before serving, remove the sausage and cut it into bite-sized pieces. Add a few pieces of sausage and a spoonful of freshly cooked pasta to heated soup bowls. Ladle the soup over the sausage and pasta and add to each serving a generous spoonful of pistou, shaved Parmesan and freshly chopped (raw) spinach. Add freshly ground pepper, if desired.

PISTOU

- 1 small shallot, chopped
- 1-2 serrano peppers, sliced in half
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes
- 1 large bunch cilantro, washed, stems removed
- 1/3 cup grapeseed oil
- Juice from 1 lemon or lime
- Salt to taste

In a food processor, purée the raw shallot, hot peppers, cherry tomatoes and cilantro. Add the oil in a slow steady stream. Season well with lime (or lemon) juice and salt. This flavourful sauce should be quite piquant; add additional lime and salt to taste.

FRENCH ONION SOUP

I've used just about every type of onion for this soup. Feel free to use whatever onions you have on hand. *Makes 6 servings.*

- 2 Tbsp unsalted butter
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 5 medium onions (about 3 lbs), sliced
- Pinch of dried thyme, or a sprig of fresh thyme
- 2 Tbsp cognac or dry sherry
- 6 cups beef or roasted chicken stock, preferably homemade
- Salt and pepper (to taste)

6 slices of French bread, toasted if fresh
 1 1/2 cups grated Gruyere cheese

Melt the butter and oil in a Dutch oven or heavy bottomed soup pot over medium-low heat. Add the onions and thyme and stir to coat. (It may appear as if you have too many onions for your pot, but they will reduce significantly.)

Cook, stirring occasionally until the onions start to brown, about 15 minutes. Reduce the heat and continue to cook, covered, stirring often, until the onions are a rich-brown colour, about 40 minutes.

Stir in the cognac (or sherry) and increase the heat to high and cook, stirring constantly, until all the alcohol has evaporated.

Stir in the stock and bring to a boil and simmer, partially covered, for about 20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Ladle the hot soup into oven-proof bowls. Top each serving with a slice of French bread and a generous grating of Gruyere cheese. Broil or bake in a 450°F oven until the cheese is melted.

ROASTED SQUASH SOUP WITH APPLE AND PEAR

Makes 6-8 servings.

**The seeds can be reserved, toasted and used as a soup garnish if desired.*

2 medium acorn squash, quartered and seeds removed*	cored and diced
3 carrots, peeled and chopped into large chunks	4 cups roasted chicken stock, preferably homemade
2 Tbsp vegetable oil	Kosher salt
1 apple, preferably Golden Delicious, peeled, cored and diced	1 cup 35% cream
2 Tbsp unsalted butter	100 grams (3.5 ounces) of mild blue cheese (I like Rosenborgh Castello's Mellow Blue brand)
1 onion, peeled and diced	Toasted pumpkin or squash seeds, if desired (method below)
1 large ripe pear (Bartlett or Bosc),	

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a medium bowl, toss the carrots in 1 Tbsp of the vegetable oil and place them on a foil-lined baking tray. Brush the squash with the remaining oil and place on the same tray. Roast the vegetables for about an hour turning them occasionally for even browning. Remove the vegetables when they can easily be pierced with a fork. (The carrots will be done first.) When the squash has cooled, scoop the pulp from the squash and discard the skin.

Melt the butter in a soup pot over medium heat and add the diced apple. Cook the apple until it turns soft and just starts to colour. Add the chopped onion and cook until the onion is translucent.

In a blender or a food processor fitted with a steel blade, add the roasted carrots and squash, sautéed apples and onions, diced pear, 2 cups of the chicken stock and a couple of generous pinches of kosher salt. Process until smooth, adding enough remaining stock to achieve the desired consistency. Taste the soup and check the seasoning, adding more salt if necessary.

If you prefer a velvety textured soup, pour the puréed soup through a fine-mesh strainer. Transfer the soup to a saucepan and reheat. Serve in heated bowls with a generous swirl of blue cheese cream (recipe follows) and a few toasted squash (or pumpkin seeds) if desired.

BLUE CHEESE CREAM

In a small saucepan, gently melt the blue cheese in the warm cream. Do not boil.

TOASTED SQUASH SEEDS

Rinse the squash seeds to remove the fibres. Toast the cleaned seeds on a lightly oiled baking sheet in a 350°F oven until crisp and lightly golden, turning occasionally. Sprinkle with salt while still warm.

For Denise's recipe for **Roasted Chicken Stock** go to www.eatmagazine.ca and type "Roasted Chicken Stock" into Search.

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