The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Lentil Soup Four Ways

Use up this pantry staple deliciously

By Jennifer Eremeeva

March 28, 2020

Ottoman spice lentil soup **Jennifer Eremeeva / MT**

People will do astonishing things for a bowl of lentil soup.

Take Esau, the son of Isaac and Rebekah in the Biblical Book of Genesis, who sells his birthright to his brother Jacob for a dish of red lentils.

And without much hesitation either.

"...Esau came from the field, and he was faint

And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me I pray thee, with the same red pottage; for O am faint...

And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright

And Esau said, Behold I am at the point to die."

And the choice is clear for Esau.

"...and what profit shall this birthright do to me?" Esau agrees to the terms, then wolfs down the stew, and can we blame him?

This is how Jacob's line became the A-Team in the Bible and lentils entered the culinary canon. Both have been firmly ensconced ever since.

Apart from being one of our most venerable ingredients, lentils are the kind of pantry staple that do stellar service as we shelter in place: they last for months, they are easy to cook and delicious either as a hardy stew or a tangy salad. Their ability to stretch a meal is the stuff of legend, which is why there are so many versions of lentil and bean soup in rural peasant food. When cooked, lentils swell up, some even trebling in size, which has given rise to the notion that they are talismans of good fortune, particularly in Italy, where little bags of lentils are exchanged as symbols of prosperity at New Year's.

Lenten Fare

Lentils are also an excellent substitute for meat, which is relevant this week as we still have three weeks to go to the end of Orthodoxy's Great Lenten Fast. If you are still adhering to this stringent 40-day diet, which forbids meat, fish, poultry, dairy, oil, and alcohol, congratulations! That's tough in the middle of a pandemic. But even if you aren't, there's every reason to make a pot of lentil soup and try to find something on Netflix you haven't watched yet.

Get Creative: Riff on the Basic Recipe

I have at least nine versions of lentil soup in my repertoire, which sounds impressive until you start to really study the recipes; the essential base of lentil soup is an effortless combination of aromatics, vegetables, stock, and tomato paste to thicken it. It's when you start to play with other additions that you can end up with everything from the fiery flavors of Ottoman-Spice Lentil Soup to the lip-puckering sour notes of Armenian Lentil Soup, or the delightful anise notes of French Lentil stew with garlic sausage and Herbs de Provence. Each of these belies the oft-heard complaint that lentil soup is watery and tasteless: these are both easy to avoid with a few extra steps.

Lentil soup is also a great opportunity to "sweep the fridge" and use up anything inside the vegetable crisper or meat drawer that might be going slightly limp. Make croutons from stale bread to float on top of the soup!

Types of Lentils

Of the many types of lentils you might use, my recommendation while we're in #QuarantineCuisine mode that you use the ones that are already in your pantry. The method presented here works equally well for delicate red lentils, tiny, elegant green French lentils, the workhorse black "Beluga" lentil, or the more common, coarser brown lentils. The only difference is the amount of time you cook them if you want them to have some bite.

Basic Lentil Soup Base

This is a very basic lentil soup recipe you can assemble with things you already have on hand. If you are missing an ingredient (apart from the lentils), please don't worry about it — the soup will be fine. Bravely add whatever you have on hand, such as Parmesan rinds, ham, sausages, or the end of a salami. Once you've finished the base, consult the accompanying infographic for ideas on how to flavor the soup.

Ingredients

- 3 Tbsp olive oil
- 1-½ (350 ml) cups chopped aromatics (onions, leeks, shallots, etc.)
- 3 stalks celery and/or 1 medium fennel bulb (remove the chalky stems but keep the fronds)
- 2 cups (480 ml) lentils, picked and rinsed
- One 14-oz can crushed tomatoes
- 2 Tbsp tomato paste
- 6 cloves garlic
- 3 Tbsp dried spices*
- 2 cups (480 ml) roasted vegetables such as cherry tomatoes, bell peppers (red, yellow, or orange), carrots, parsnips
- 2 branches fresh thyme tied together
- 2 bay leaves
- Salt and pepper
- 10 cups of chicken or vegetable stock

Garnish Ideas

- Yogurt or sour cream
- Lemon wedges
- Drizzle with olive oil
- Grated cheese
- Chopped fresh herbs and fennel fronds
- Sprinkle with a combination of spices

**See infographic for suggested combinations*

Instructions

- Heat the oil in a large, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the aromatics and sauté until soft (about 5 minutes), adding a generous pinch of salt halfway through.
- Add the celery and fennel and cook for an additional 3 minutes. Add the lentils and stir to combine before adding the tomato paste. Toss to mix so that the lentil/onion mixture is coated. Add the spices, then cook for 3 more minutes.
- Add the tomatoes and let simmer until the liquid has almost completely evaporated.
- Add the roasted vegetables and nestle the thyme and bay leaves into the mixture. Add the stock and crushed tomatoes and bring to a low simmer, stirring to combine. Slice the sausage and add to the stew.
- Reduce the heat to low and simmer with the lid of the pot slightly ajar for minutes until the lentils are soft (25-35 for red lentils to 50 minutes for coarse brown lentils)

Texture

One of the biggest complaints about lentil soup is that it is watery. This is easily fixed by blending some of the soup and reincorporating it into the pot. This will create thickness and heft to the soup.

If you like a chunky texture, decant 1-2 cups of the soup and process in a blender or a food processor fitted with a steel blade. Add to the remaining soup.

If you like a completely smooth texture, consider adding some coconut milk or yogurt to the soup before processing everything.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/28/lentil-soup-four-ways-a69784