Luxurious Cabbage Soup

Every cook needs a go-to vegetable soup in their repertoire. This is one of my favorites. It’s flavorful, colorful, and keeps well for a few days. In fact, I think it tastes best on days 2 and 3. This is meatless soup, but the hard Parmesan rind acts as a “bone” to enrich the broth. (Some grocery stores sell Parmesan rinds at a fraction of the cost of a full wedge.) Although some recipes tell us to discard the rinds after they’ve done their job, I like to nibble on them after they soften during the long simmer.

Pay attention to the use of vinegar, both when the soup is first made and when it’s reheated. The acidic vinegar wakes up and enhances the other flavors. The key is to use only enough to brighten the soup instead of making it taste sour. I always say that we should taste when the vinegar is missing, not when it’s present.

Sometimes I replace the cooked beans, which can be home-cooked or canned, with pasta, such as small tortellini.

Makes 8 servings

3 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1 medium-size onion, coarsely (about 2 cups)
2 medium-size carrots, coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)
1 small fennel bulb, cored and coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)
3 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
1/4 cup tomato paste
6 cups richly flavored vegetable or chicken stock, preferably homemade
1 very small cabbage (preferably Savoy), cored and thinly shredded (about 1 pound or 8 cups shredded)
2 pieces Parmesan rind
3 cups cooked white beans, drained
1 tablespoon sherry or unfiltered apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
1/4 cup thinly sliced fresh basil leaves
Kosher salt, ground black pepper, and crushed red pepper flakes, to taste

1. Place the onion, carrots, fennel, and garlic in the bowl of a food processor and pulse until very finely chopped, just short of a puree. (Alternatively, chop the vegetables as finely as possible with a knife.)
2. Warm the oil in a small soup pot over medium heat. Stir in the onion mixture and a big pinch of salt. Cover and cook until very soft, similar to a sauce, about 10 minutes, stirring often.
3. Increase the heat to medium-high. Stir in the tomato paste and cook until the mixture begins to sizzle, about 1 minute, stirring quickly and continuously.
4. Stir in 6 cups of the stock and bring to a simmer. Stir in the cabbage and another big pinch of salt. Drop in the Parmesan rinds. Simmer the soup until the cabbage is tender, about 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Retrieve the cheese rinds and either discard (a waste!) or nibble them as a cook’s treat.
6. Stir in the beans, vinegar, and thyme. Add more stock if the soup is too thick. Return to a simmer and cook until warmed through, about 5 minutes.
7. Just before serving, stir in the basil. Season generously with salt, pepper, and pepper flakes.
8. Serve warm, drizzled with more olive oil, if you like.

Make-Ahead: It keeps nicely for days, as big-batch soup should. That being said, be sure to check the seasoning each time you reheat the soup, especially if you freeze any leftovers. Deep chilling mutes seasoning, so it will likely need a little salt, pepper, and a tiny spoonful of vinegar – just enough acidity to wake up the flavors without making it sour.

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Slightly Fancy and Really Good Cheese Toast

Most of us can agree that there is no bad cheese toast. I believe we can also agree that there is also very good cheese toast, such as this one that’s just a little bit fancy. I often collect the last little bits of various cheeses in a container to use for this recipe.

Makes 8 servings

8 large slices rustic bread
3 tablespoons butter, at room temperature
Kosher salt and ground black pepper
1 1/2 cups coarsely shredded cheese, preferably at least two types, such as sharp Cheddar, mozzarella, Gruyere, Gouda, and/or Parmesan
2 tablespoons mayonnaise
1 tablespoon wholegrain mustard

1. Preheat the oven to 450°F.
2. Butter one side of each bread slice, Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Arrange in a single layer on a baking sheet. Bake until lightly toasted, about 5 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, stir together the cheese, mayonnaise, and mustard
4. Spread over the warm toast. Continue baking (or pop under the broiler) until the cheese melts and bubbles with golden brown spots, about 5 minutes. Serve warm.

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