

Harira Soup



Heavenly Recipes from the Kitchen of *Patrick deRosemond*

Let me introduce you to a soup that is a meal, and rocks with flavour, especially in the cold season. It is called Harira Soup and is common to all Arabic countries bordering the Mediterranean. There are as many versions as there are different nations and localities in that part of the world.

Traditionally this hearty soup is created to break the fast at the end of Ramadan. Although many of the recipes call for chick peas to be used, I prefer to use lentils as they are more immediate. Chick peas have to soak overnight and I always find that a bit of a hassle. By all means use chick peas if you prefer the flavour.



Before listing the ingredients let me mention the ones that are primary. They are onions, tomatoes, lentils, lemon juice and cilantro. This is the core of the soup. It is customary to use lamb but you can use any meat, and even make it vegetarian. You can spice it up or keep it quite mild. The best part of this soup is that it freezes well and you can reheat it and have a meal in ten minutes.

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups of dried lentils

½ cup of basmati rice – preferably brown

3 cups of pureed tomatoes

1½ to 2 lbs of chopped tomatoes

4 cups of coarsely chopped onions (A little more won't hurt)

1 lb of lean beef mince (Remember that lamb, chicken or no meat is ok)

1 cup of fine chopped celery

2 packed cups of chopped cilantro

4 Tbs of butter (What the heck, a dollop will do)

4 Tbs of olive oil
4 cloves of garlic (I use a bit more but use what you can handle)
1 Tbs of coarsely ground pepper (Five pepper-corn mix is the best)
1 Tbs of freshly ground ginger
2 Tbs of fresh ground cumin (Tempering makes it ten times better)
1 tsp of cinnamon
½ tsp of ground turmeric
¼ to ½ cup of lemon juice and more if needed (See notes below)
10 cups of water
1 Tbs of beef, chicken or vegetable stock paste/powder. More to taste if necessary. 1 or 2 hot chilies optional.

Although I have not listed the following ingredients above, I sometimes add them to the soup. Red or green peppers, a small zucchini, eggplant, okra, a small potato chopped up, tomatillos, or dried barley. Use your imagination after you have got the hang of this soup. By the way, I love Okra and use it as often as possible. If you want to know more about this wonderful vegetable just email me and I will pass on a few tips.

DIRECTIONS

Heat butter and oil and add onions. Cook on a medium heat until just turning gold at the edges. Then add celery and sauté for another 3 to 4 minutes. Add ground beef and sauté for 4 to 5 minutes. Then simply add all the rest of the ingredients but only half the cilantro, stir well and bring to a boil. Turn heat down to a simmer, put a lid on the pot and cook until lentils are soft. Depending on the type of lentils you use this could be anything from 60 to 90 minutes. Stir occasionally so that nothing sticks on the bottom. About halfway through the cooking process do a little tasting. Adjust for saltiness by adding a little more stock or fish sauce. It should have a good presence of lemons. You might need to add a squeeze or two more. A strong flavour of cilantro should fill your mouth. If you like a little more spice add a bit more chili.

When the dish is ready to be served, add the rest of the cilantro and enjoy with a fresh baguette or artesian bread. If you are serving this at a dinner party then slice a tomato thinly, float the pieces on the top of the soup bowl and then add your cilantro.

One last word. Fish sauce is an essential ingredient in our kitchen and we would be at a loss to cook without it. Most people associate it with Asian cooking and something quite exotic when in fact it is a staple of gourmet cooking. Yes, I know it has a funny smell in the bottle and some people have pretty colourful descriptions of its unique odor. Buy a good quality, usually in the six-to-eight dollar range, and preferably the Vietnamese brands as they are well aged and mellow. When added to any savory dish it imparts a rich protein flavour (Umami) and the fishy flavour disappears completely. It is the ultimate booster to any stew, soup, curry and even gravies. Once you get to know this product you will always have it handy. By the way, the main ingredient in Lee and Perins Worcester Sauce is anchovies.

Have fun and let me know how you liked it!

Pat