It’s Time for Soup

As the temperature goes down, I crave warm tea and soup. Soups are an opportunity to fit more vegetables into your day. They are a way to find comfort with a little less expense. A good pot of soup can be made with less expensive cuts of meat or smaller amounts of leftover meat.

It is fun to play with different herbs and spices to create different flavors. Italian soups sing with oregano, marjoram and rosemary. Greek soups often marry the flavors of dill, oregano and lemon. Thai soups feature lemongrass, basil and chilies. Mexican soups create heady aromas with a generous dash of cumin, chili powder and a touch of oregano. Most soups benefit from generous amounts of garlic. Herbs and spices not only add flavor and depth to soups but they also carry antioxidant value.

On one of our Family Nutrition Program outreach cards, we have a recipe for Cream of Anything Soup. I love that recipe and use it often to clean out the refrigerator. Soup is a great way to use up leftovers that have been hanging around two or three days. By letting your creative juices flow, you can have dinner on the table in less than half an hour if you are using precooked meat. It doesn’t take much time to cut up a few vegetables (if you don’t have leftover veggies to use up). And it is even faster to use frozen vegetables. So here is the recipe for Cream of Anything Soup.

Combine the following in a pot and simmer until vegetables are desired doneness: 2 cups water or broth; 2-3 cups any vegetable or a mixture of vegetables (roughly chopped); 1 small onion (diced); 1 tsp. salt or to taste; 1/8 tsp. pepper; 1/2 tsp. garlic powder; and 1-2 tsp. herbs like thyme or marjoram. As this mixture is simmering, mix 4 tablespoons flour, thoroughly, into 1 1/2 cups milk. Add to soup with 1/2 to 1 cup of cooked chicken, pork or beef if you want meat in your soup. Boil gently for a minute or two until the soup thickens. Can be served with a sprinkling of chopped parsley and/or grated cheese.
This creamy soup can be turned into a curry by using a can of coconut milk instead of regular milk and substituting a tablespoon or so curry powder, or a couple teaspoons curry paste, for the herbs. Fresh basil brings a wonderful brightness to a curry.

If you prefer clear soups instead of creamy soups, you can use broth for all of the liquid mentioned above. Play with different combinations of meat and vegetables. Add a can of diced tomatoes for part of the liquid. If you prefer thinner soups, skip the flour.

You can also plan to have leftover vegetables for a particular soup. Cook more than you need one night so you’ll have plenty available one or two days later. Roasted vegetables give a whole new dimension to a soup or stew. A cup of cooked or canned, rinsed beans add fiber and heartiness, such as garbanzo beans in minestrone. Wonderful Italian-type soups can be made with cannoli or navy beans, too.

Add thinly sliced kale to really kick up the nutrient value of any soup. Another nutritional powerhouse is seaweed. Dried wakame seaweed can be sprinkled in a chicken soup, simmering it long enough to rehydrate and cook it. It can be the main vegetable in a miso soup or an interesting side note in a Thai fish soup.

There are very few rules to follow when making a good pot of soup. But one is to think about the texture of the ingredients or how you want the texture to be in the finished product. Raw, dense root vegetables should be added to the pot first to give them a chance to cook. Add raw, less dense vegetables, such as zucchini and summer squash, later. Adding cooked, diced meat toward the end will help keep the integrity of the meat. The more you cook it, the more it will shred.

Dry herbs can be added toward the beginning of the process so they can rehydrate and release their flavors. Fresh herbs should not be added until the last 5 or so minutes, in my opinion. You can actually lose much of the flavor and color of fresh herbs by overcooking them.

So pull out a pot, rummage through the refrigerator and see what delightful concoctions you can come up with in the name of soup.

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