

January 16, 2019

Release Date: January 23, 2019

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WARM UP WITH A HOT BOWL OF SOUP

It's freezing outside, literally, so warm up with a hot bowl of soup. Soup is comfort food that wraps you in a blanket of warmth, while providing a delicious blend of flavors. There are just so many ways to make a sandwich but there are a million ways to make a bowl of soup. The best soups are homemade and we've provided you with an assortment of unique recipes beyond the typical chicken noodle or cream of tomato.

Soups come in a multitude of flavors, as many as A to Z. You can have them warm or cold, milk based or broth based, with meat or without. When was the last time you indulged yourself in all the wonderful choices...cream of asparagus, corn chowder, gumbo, shrimp bisque, beef and barley, split pea, and of course, Maryland crab. My mouth waters just thinking about all the choices and I'm headed to the kitchen to get out the soup pot.

For the calorie watcher, soups make a great appetizer and can help decrease total caloric intake at a meal by helping to fill up the stomach. That is, if you select lower calorie soups. For example, a cup of minestrone soup has 82 calories but a cup of New England clam chowder contains a whopping 398 calories. Check the nutrition facts label on the can. The USDA Nutrient Data Laboratory website lists nutritional analysis for a variety of soups including canned, dehydrated, commercially prepared and homemade. Their web address is: <https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/ndb/>

For a healthy meal alternative to the typical meat, starch, and vegetable routine, serve soup as the main item or entrée. Serve with a roll or muffin, glass of milk, and fresh fruit; and you have a delicious and nutritious meal for your family. To save time, make a big batch of soup on the weekend and freeze in pint size containers for future meals. Realize that some soups do not freeze well.

For homemade soups you can decrease the calories by cutting back on the fat in the recipe. Don't totally eliminate the fat which provides flavor, just use less. Another trick is to use evaporated skim milk in place of half and half or cream. Experiment and see what you like. A simple way to prepare meat based broths is to put leftover meat bones in the crock pot with water on the high setting and simmer for hours.

Boost the nutrient content of soups by adding extra vegetables. For vitamin C toss in some red pepper, cabbage, tomatoes, or broccoli right before you finish cooking since heat destroys Vitamin C. Vitamin A rich vegetables include pumpkin, carrots, spinach, and butternut squash. When preparing milk based soups add non-fat dry milk to increase calcium intake.

There is good news for individuals who avoid soup because of the high sodium content. Currently food manufacturers are reformulating canned soups to decrease their sodium content. Some have been decreased by as much as 40%. Over time your taste buds will adjust to the lower sodium level.

Soup...ummm....ummmm...good!

MUSHROOM AND RICE SOUP

Vegetable cooking spray
2 tablespoons reduced-calorie margarine
2 cups finely chopped celery
1 cup chopped onion
1/2 pound fresh mushrooms, sliced
2 1/2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
4 cups skim milk, divided use
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground white pepper
1/4 teaspoon thyme leaves
1 1/2 cups cooked long-grain rice (cooked without salt or fat)
Fresh celery leaves (optional)

Coat a Dutch oven with cooking spray; add margarine. Place over medium heat until margarine melts. Add celery and onion; sauté until almost tender, add mushrooms and sauté 2-3 minutes.

Combine flour and 1/2 cup milk, stirring until smooth; add to vegetable mixture. Add remaining 3-1/2 cups milk, salt, pepper, and thyme; cook, stirring constantly, until mixture is thickened. Stir in rice; reduce heat to low, and simmer 15 minutes. To serve, ladle into bowls and garnish with celery leaves, if desired. Makes 8 (1-cup) servings. Nutritional Analysis per 1-cup serving: 134 calories, 3.2 gm total fat, 0 gm saturated fat, 2 mg cholesterol, 260 mg sodium.

CHEDDAR CHICKEN CHOWDER

2 bacon slices
1 pound skinned, boned chicken breast -- cut into bite-size pieces
1 cup chopped onion
1 cup diced red bell pepper
2 garlic cloves -- minced
4 1/2 cups fat-free chicken broth
1 3/4 cups diced peeled red potato
2 1/4 cups frozen whole-kernel corn
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
2 cups 2% low-fat milk
3/4 cup (3 ounces) shredded Cheddar cheese
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper

Cook bacon in a Dutch oven coated with cooking spray over medium-high heat until crisp. Remove bacon from pan. Crumble; set aside. Add chicken, onion, bell pepper, and garlic to bacon fat in pan; sauté 5 minutes. Add broth and potatoes; bring to boil. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 20 minutes or until potatoes are tender. Add corn; stir well.

CHEDDAR CHICKEN CHOWDER (continued)

Place flour in a bowl. Gradually add milk, stirring with a whisk until blended; add to soup. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium, and simmer 15 minutes or until thick, stirring frequently. Stir in cheese, salt, and pepper. Top with crumbled bacon. Source: Cooking Light. Servings 7, Serving Size: 1 1/2 cups. Calories: 306; fat 7.5 g; protein 25 g; carb 33.7; fiber 2.9g; sodium 376 mg.

SALSA SOUP

This is as good cold as it is hot. Please don't give into your urge to top it with chips. Stick with the cilantro. You'll be happy you did.

1 large yellow onion
2 large garlic cloves, minced
1 small fresh jalapeno chili, seeded and minced
1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes in juice, coarsely chopped
1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes in thick puree
1 (4-ounce) jar "hot" or "medium" salsa (your taste choice)
3 ounces cream cheese, cut into chunks
4 cups chicken broth
1 cup light cream
2 tablespoons fresh lime juice, or to taste
1/2 teaspoon Tabasco, or to taste
3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, or to taste plus whole cilantro leaves for garnish
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a large pot or Dutch oven, over medium heat, sauté the onion, garlic and jalapeno in the butter until the onion is translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes and salsa and cook, stirring frequently, until the liquid has mostly evaporated, about 20 minutes. The mixture will be thick and porridge-like, with noisily popping bubbles that spatter the stovetop.

With the heat turned low, add the cream cheese in chunks, stirring constantly until it's all melted. Stir in the chicken broth, cream and lime juice, Tabasco and cilantro and heat everything gently. Salt and pepper to taste, if you need it. (Serves 6).

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