

Greek Lentil and Spinach Soup With Lemon

Active: 20 mins **Total:** 55 mins **Servings:** 8 servings (makes 12 cups)

Can you imagine eating the same lentil soup at your desk for lunch virtually every workday for almost two decades?

I couldn't, at least not until I talked to Reid Branson, a Seattle nurse manager who has been doing just that. The soup is from Crescent Dragonwagon's 1992 book "Dairy Hollow House Soup & Bread," and Branson fell so in love with it that it changed his lunch routine for the rest of his professional life.

Branson's schedule is fairly unpredictable, as you might imagine: He supervises the nursing staff at the HIV clinic of a public hospital, Harborview Medical Center, where he and others have been plenty busy lately keeping on top of developments in the coronavirus outbreak. The one thing he can depend on, day in and day out, is this bright, rich and fragrant Greek lentil and spinach soup. It's hearty and thick, with lentils as the base, bulked up by potatoes and butternut squash, and a flavor enlivened by a heavy dose of aromatic spices — plus a pop of fresh lemon juice.

"I'm a vegetarian, and getting a reliable source of protein every day at lunch is important to me," Branson, 63, told me in a phone interview. "Plus, it's fun to make. It's got a rhythm to it. And at this point, I can do it without looking at the recipe."

This all started when his favorite brand of canned soup, his previous workday lunch habit, changed the recipe to something he didn't enjoy. "We had made other things we liked out of Crescent's book," he said, "so I went hunting and found the Greek lentil soup and made a batch, and the rest is history."

That was 17 years ago. Every other Saturday since, Branson has made enough of the soup to fill four glass jars, enough to last him for eight lunches. (He works nine days over every two-week stretch, and on the ninth he goes back to opening a can.) Sometimes, if he makes a little extra soup — if, say, the butternut squash or potatoes he buys are bigger than usual — he'll have some left over and his wife gets a taste, too.

In case you think he would get bored by something he has eaten thousands of times, far from it. Even though he always uses the same ingredients, "the soup never really tastes the same," he said. "It's always a little bit of a surprise: The onion came out strongly this time, or that's a really good butternut squash. If I hadn't made it as often as I had, I'd never have noticed that."

Scale and get a printer-friendly version of the recipe here.

When Branson emailed Dragonwagon about his soup fandom, she was delighted: What cookbook author wouldn't be upon hearing that someone had made one of your recipes hundreds of times?

"I am glad to have been eating lunch with you all these years, without even knowing it," she wrote him back.

All good things must come to an end, including Branson's ritual lunches. He's retiring soon. "I have a countdown clock on my desk that says 111 days," he said. "So I suspect I'll retire the soup."

But 111 days from today, I plan to make a big vat of it and bring it to my retirement party. That way, everybody else can have some.”

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In addition to all its other virtues, this brightly flavorful, easy soup from an almost three-decade-old cookbook is vegan, gluten-free and low-fat. Don't skip the clean zing of lemon, which makes it sing.

Storage notes: The soup can be refrigerated for up to 2 weeks or frozen for up to 3 months.

Ingredients

- 1 pound brown or large green lentils, rinsed and picked over
- 10 cups vegetable broth or water
- 1 jalapeño pepper, stemmed, seeded and chopped
- 2 teaspoons whole coriander seeds
- 1 1/2 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 2 1/2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 medium Yukon gold, russet or red potatoes (1 1/4 pounds), scrubbed and cut into 1/2-inch dice
- 10 ounces baby spinach, chopped
- 1 small butternut squash (1 pound), peeled, seeded and cut into 1/2-inch dice (about 3 cups)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 ribs celery, with leaves, sliced
- 3 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt, or more to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or more to taste
- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
- 2 lemons

Step 1

In a large soup pot over medium-high heat, combine the lentils, stock or water, jalapeño, coriander, cumin, oregano and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low. Simmer, partially covered, about 30 minutes, until the lentils are tender.

Step 2

Add the potatoes, spinach and butternut squash, re-cover and cook another 15 to 20 minutes, until the potatoes and squash are tender.

Step 3

Meanwhile, in a large skillet over medium heat, heat the olive oil until shimmering. Add the onion, and cook, stirring, until it starts to soften, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the celery and garlic and cook, stirring often, until they soften, 3 minutes. Add the mixture to the soup, deglazing the skillet with a little soup liquid and adding the deglaze contents back to the soup pot. Add the salt and pepper, taste, and add more if needed. Pick out and discard the bay leaves.

Step 4

Thinly slice one of the lemons and cut the other into wedges. Just before serving, stir the lemon juice into the soup. Serve the soup hot, with a lemon slice floating atop each bowl. Pass lemon wedges at the table.

Adapted from "Dairy Hollow House Soup & Bread" by Crescent Dragonwagon (Workman Publishing, 1992)

Tested by Joe Yonan; email questions to voraciously@washpost.com.

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Did you make this recipe? Take a photo and tag us on Instagram with #eatvoraciously.

NOTE: Nutritional analysis is based on water instead of vegetable broth.

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Nutrition

Calories: 340; Total Fat: 4.5 g; Saturated Fat: 0.5 g; Trans Fat: 0 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 330 mg; Carbohydrates: 58 g; Dietary Fiber: 22 g; Sugars: 4 g; Protein: 18 g.