

Comfort by the spoonful: Soups to help keep winter — and your waistline — in place

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By Margaret Maples

Pureeing thickens broccoli soup naturally, but if your schedule heats up unexpectedly, you can skip this step. The soup will be a bit thinner, but the broccoli and nutmeg flavor will carry on.

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Hot homemade soup can beat a winter chill and still rate as healthy where calories and fat are concerned. But this time, “healthy” means anything but blah.

For a colorful start to a cold-weather dinner, try broccoli soup, suggests registered dietitian Lisa C. Andrews of Sound Bites Nutrition, LLC in Cincinnati, Ohio (www.soundbitesnutrition.com). At 80 calories a cup, it’s very low-cal, she says.

“Before serving, I usually add a little chopped green onion and shredded 2 percent milk cheddar cheese,” Andrews said. This pumps up color and flavor but won’t shift the soup out of healthy gear. Or rattle its warm seasoning and nutmeg topnote.

Even more assertive White Chicken Chili isn’t the usual clucker.

“Step outside your box and try a new soup,” says Kate Scarlata, a registered dietitian practicing in Boston (www.beegoodbeehappy.com). Plenty of protein comes from chicken and beans, and the cannellinis and black-eyed peas pack lots of fiber.

Scarlata's recipe comes from "Real People Need Real Food," which she co-authored with dietitian Laura Einbinder. This recipe also calls for reduced-fat cheese, but as more than garnish, and baked tortilla chips. "When you add the chips and cheese," says Scarlata, "you morph this soup into a main entrée versus a starter!"

These delicious homemades do take longer to prepare than canned or dry soups, but you get to control sodium and other chemicals often used in convenience foods. The best benefit: You slow down and make time for family conversations as wonderful aromas swirl through the kitchen.

Broccoli Soup

4 cups fresh broccoli florets and stems, chopped into bite-size pieces

1/2 cup finely diced onion

3 cups low-sodium chicken broth

Dash ground nutmeg

1/4 tsp. seasoned salt

1/4 tsp. celery salt

1/2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

3 tsp. cornstarch

3/4 cup 2% milk

Garnishes:

Shredded or grated 2% milk cheddar

Chopped green onion (green part only)

In a 2-quart stock pot, combine broccoli, onion, broth, nutmeg, seasoned salt, celery salt and Worcestershire sauce. Bring to a boil, then reduce to simmer until vegetables are tender but broccoli is still bright green – from 20 to 25 minutes. Puree 2/3 cup of the vegetables in a food processor or blender. Stir puree back into warm soup. Place cornstarch into a small bowl; add 2 to 3 tablespoons hot broth and mix completely smooth. Stir cornstarch mixture into simmering soup. Add milk to soup and bring back to serving temperature; do not boil. Serve in ramekins or cups as appetizers. Garnish lightly with sprinkles of cheese and green onion. Makes 4 servings.

Source: Lisa C. Andrews, MEd, RD, LD, www.soundbitesnutrition.com

Nutrition facts: 80 calories; 44.6 g carbohydrate; 1.2 g fat; .6 g saturated fat; 1.5 g fiber; 5.6 g protein; 255 mg sodium

White Chicken Chili

1 tbsp. olive oil

1 lb. boneless, skinless chicken breast, cut in bite-size pieces

3 14-oz. cans low-fat, low-sodium chicken broth

14- oz. can black-eyed peas, drained and rinsed to eliminate salt used in canning

14- oz. can cannellini beans, drained and rinsed to eliminate salt used in canning

1 tbsp. chili powder

2 tsp. ground cumin

1 small yellow onion, finely diced

1 garlic clove, minced

Dash white pepper and salt

1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro (optional)

2 cups reduced-fat grated cheddar (Sargento brand works well)

Baked tortilla chips

Stove-top method: In a 3-quart stock pot, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add chicken and sauté until cooked through. Add broth, peas, beans, chili powder, cumin, onion, garlic, white pepper and salt. Simmer for 20 to 30 minutes (can cook for as long as an hour on low heat).

Slow-cooker method: Place all ingredients in a slow cooker and cook 4 to 6 hours or until chicken is done. Serve as appetizer or entrée, as described above. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Source: "Real People Need Real Food" by Kate Scarlata, RD, LDN, and Laura Einbinder, RD, LDN

Nutrition facts: Soup: 230 calories; 22 g carbohydrates; 5 g fat; less than 1 g saturated fat; 6 g fiber; 25 g protein; 646 mg sodium. Cheese and 15 baked tortilla chips: 200 calories; 24 g carbohydrate; 9 g fat; 4.5 saturated fat; 2 g fiber; 9 g protein; 330 mg sodium