

Lentil and Sweet Red Pepper Soup with Cumin and Black Pepper

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I use a small, plump, shrewdly marketed black lentil dubbed "beluga" for this soup, but you can use dark green French lentils or flat olive-green ones, or you can try other pulses such as split peas — green, orange, or gold. Just be prepared to adjust the amount of stock or water. Whole cumin and black peppercorns, crushed just before you add them to the soup, flavor it boldly. I have served this soup three different ways — straight from the pot, irregularly mashed in a mortar, and fully puréed in a blender or processor. Each method produces a different texture and character, and I like all three.

Yield: Makes about 5 cups

Active Time: 20 minutes

Total Time: 40 minute

ingredients

- 1 cup lentils (preferably small)
- 1 fresh flat-leaf parsley sprig, finely chopped (including stem)
- 1 Turkish bay leaf or 1/2 California bay leaf
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups water
- 24 whole black peppercorns
- 1/4 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup finely diced red bell pepper
- 1/4 cup finely diced carrot
- 1/4 cup finely diced celery
- 1/4 cup finely chopped onion
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped

preparation

Simmer lentils with parsley, bay leaf, broth, and water in a 4-quart saucepan, uncovered, until tender, 30 to 40 minutes.

While lentils are cooking, coarsely grind peppercorns with cumin using a mortar and pestle or an electric coffee/spice grinder. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a 4-quart heavy saucepan over moderate heat until hot but not smoking, then cook bell pepper, stirring, until golden, about 5 minutes. Add spices and cook, stirring, 1 minute. Add carrot, celery, onion, garlic, and remaining 3 tablespoons oil and cook, stirring, until carrot is tender, about 8 minutes. Stir in lentil mixture and discard bay leaf.

Purée 1 cup soup in a blender until smooth (use caution when blending hot liquids). Stir purée into remaining soup and reheat over moderate heat, stirring. Season soup with salt and pepper. If soup seems too thick, thin with water to desired consistency.

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