

MAKE A BETTER SOUP

Soup is a favorite meal to make for many people. It's a delicious, simple meal that can be tailored to any season and contain almost any flavors. Just follow these procedures, and soon you'll have a sumptuous soup simmering in your kitchen!

1. Start with Aromatics

In the culinary world, an "aromatic" is any food item, enhancing the flavor or aroma of a dish. Aromatics are combinations of vegetables, herbs, and spices that are heated in some fat at the beginning of a dish. Think carrots, celery, chilies, cilantro, garlic, ginger, green pepper, herbs, mushrooms, onions, parsley, and shallots. To get the most flavor from the aromatics, it's best to put them in the soup at the beginning, so they have time to infuse their flavors into the soup. Sauté the aromatics in a little oil or butter just until they begin to release their fragrance and become translucent.

2. Add Other Vegetables and/or Meat

Feel free to choose meat and vegetables to create your own unique combination. Add other sources of protein such as tofu or beans if you decide to go meatless.

Vegetables should be chopped to the desired size you would like them to be on the spoon. Regardless of the style of the soup, it is important to have appropriately sized and chopped vegetables. Don't forget to also properly chop your greens such as spinach and kale into smaller bite-sized portions, or they will be challenging to eat.

The addition of vegetables needs to be staggered by the amount of cooking time required. Be sure to sequence the addition of vegetables so that they're all finished cooking as close together as possible. Tender vegetables, like peas, spinach, or even broccoli, do not require as much cooking time as root vegetables such as potatoes or carrots and should not be added until the soup is almost done cooking. Add the tender vegetables around the time when you might add pasta or herbs to the soup. As a general rule, use about four cups of vegetables for 4 to 6 servings of soup.

Tomatoes, when added at the beginning stages of the soup cooking, can keep beans and vegetables crunchy. This is due to the high amount of acid in tomatoes. As a general rule, don't add the tomatoes until the final 20 minutes when all the other ingredients are close to tender.

If you're adding meat to your soup, add it with the vegetables too. Using lean cuts of chicken, turkey, beef, lamb, or pork and legumes are a great option because they add flavor, protein, vitamins, and minerals to your soup. Legumes are a great addition because they also provide a nice serving of fiber. Avoid all tough cuts that require longer cooking times for them to break down and become tender. Do not add salty meats such as bacon, prosciutto, pepperoni and other cured meats, during the cooking process with the vegetables. They are all high in sodium and some are also high in fat; they should be considered "flavorings" to be added later.

When chopping meat to be added to the soup, follow the same guidelines as with the vegetables. The pieces of meat should fit nicely on the spoon when eating. When adding the meat to your soup, keep in mind that about one pound of meat is good for 4 to 6 servings.

3. Add Liquid

The liquid you use will make or break your soup, so always use good stock or broth. If you are making your own, intensify the flavor by searing or roasting bones and vegetables before adding water to simmer. If you are using prepared stock or broth for your soup, go with the low-sodium option so you can control the seasoning. You will want about one cup per serving: a little more for a brothy soup, a little less for a hearty one.

4. Simmer Your Soup

How you cook your soup is important. After the soup has started to boil, reduce to a simmer and make sure that it stays there. Boil the soup too vigorously, and the vegetables will get mushy, the meat will toughen, and the noodles will start to break down. Simmering allows more flavors to develop and deepen. You want your meat cooked through and your vegetables tender, which should take 20 to 30 minutes.

If you want quick-cooking grains like bulgur or quinoa, add them at the beginning of the simmer, so they have time to cook. If you are using pasta, add it 10 minutes prior to the end of cooking. In addition, remember, grains and pasta expand, so you don't need a lot—about 1/2 to 1 cup of each for 4 to 6 servings should be plenty.

5. Add Cream or Milk

Rich soups that are thickened using cream or milk can tend to curdle if you are not careful. This happens because with too much direct heat, the dairy will separate. Use full-fat dairy like whole milk, full-fat yogurt, and heavy cream. Low or non-fat varieties will separate more easily. Cold dairy should be warmed. This can be done by “tempering” the dairy. Add a 1/2 cup of soup to the milk or cream to warm it up before adding it all back to the soup. Another method is to warm the dairy in the microwave and add it slowly to the soup. Do not boil the soup!

6. Finish with Herbs and/or Seasonings

Seasoning should always be added in small amounts and the soup should be tasted after each addition. Then adjust the seasoning to your taste. Add fresh herbs right at the end so they have the greatest impact. If you add them too soon, their delicate aromas will just cook away.

7. Choose a Garnish

When choosing a garnish to top your soup, selecting toppings that contrast with the flavor and texture of the soup is going to work best. Here are some combinations:

- Crunchy on smooth (croutons on a silky puréed soup)

- Smooth on chunky (sour cream on chili)
- Bitter on savory (herbs or black pepper on lentil soup or almost anything!)
- Salty on sweet (crumbled prosciutto on sweet potato carrot soup)

Soup can be a quick and easy one-dish meal. By combining a good stock or broth with the right proportions of your favorite ingredients, and the right blend of seasonings, you can create a tasty pot of soup. Taking advantage of fresh, seasonal ingredients is best, but using frozen vegetables and refrigerated leftovers can work out just fine.