

January 9, 2008

## **A GOOD APPETITE; A Lentil Soup to Make You Stop, Taste and Savor**

By MELISSA CLARK

FOR years it seemed that everyone I knew had a special lentil soup recipe, one that sustained them and kept them warm all winter long. I had flirted with countless incarnations, and most tasted reasonably good. They were brawny, solid and predictable. I liked them in varying degrees, but never quite enough to take home to my soup pot. Until recently, when I fell head over heels. Could this be the one?

It was so unexpected. At a friend's dinner party this fall, white espresso cups filled with a steaming liquid were passed around as hors d'oeuvres. Deep in conversation, I took an absent-minded sip that instantly dazzled, yet mystified me. A gorgeous soup, it was warming and hearty, and possessed a velvety texture that recalled some kind of pur? legume. But it had a zesty, spicy flavor that was more ethereal and sunny than any earthbound, wintry bean.

"It's nothing, just a little lentil soup," said my hostess nonchalantly when I cornered her in the kitchen to grill her.

Lentil? It didn't taste like lentils. And with its muted golden color, it didn't look like them either.

"Red lentils, Sweetie, with chili and a little lemon; I'll e-mail you tomorrow with the recipe," she promised.

In fervid anticipation, I picked up some red lentils the next morning. Unlike their more familiar green and brown cousins, red lentils are hulled and split when you buy them. This lets them cook much faster than their relatives, though they don't hold their shape as well, making them problematic for salads -- and ideal for soup. Or so I found out with a little Googling.

The e-mail appeared. I wasn't coy; I had already pulled out the soup pot.

As I figured, the ingredient list called for red lentils (check), broth (check), onion (check), cumin (check), garlic, lemons and chili powder (check, check, check). Then came some surprises: dried mint, fresh tomatoes and bulgur -- none of which were in the cupboard.

As determined as I was to make the soup, I was equally determined not to leave the house. It was cold and rainy, and there was only so much I was willing to sacrifice for a nascent crush.

Still, I had my heart set on lentils. Clearly, there would need to be some compromises if this was going to work.

The tomatoes were easy to get around. I used a fat dollop of tomato paste instead, saut?g it with the onions and garlic to give it a sweeter, more intense flavor. I also added a chopped carrot to compensate for the lost vegetable matter and to deepen the color.

The bulgur was harder to swap out. I considered rice, buckwheat groats, even steel-cut oats before deciding to leave it out altogether and double the lentils. I had plenty, and weren't they the point after all?

Then I added some broth to the pot and set it all to simmer. Half an hour later, my lentil soup was bubbling hot and ready. I squeezed in some lemon for vibrancy, drizzled on some good olive oil for richness, and to substitute for the mint, floated a handful of chopped cilantro over the surface.

I was a little nervous about digging in. With all my changes, would the soup live up to my expectations?

In fact, it was even better. Lighter and more brothy than the bulgur original, it had a buoyant, lemony disposition grounded by a profound cumin and chili backbone. It was the perfect lentil soup, at least for me. Bright, deep, compelling, and easily accessible: if I kept a supply of red lentils around, I could make the soup in under an hour whenever my heart desired.

I have been making it ever since.

Recipe: Red Lentil Soup With Lemon Time: 45 minutes

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3 tablespoons olive oil, more for drizzling

1 large onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 tablespoon tomato paste

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/4 teaspoon kosher salt, more to taste

1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

Pinch of ground chili powder or cayenne, more to taste

1 quart chicken or vegetable broth

1 cup red lentils

1 large carrot, peeled and diced

Juice of 1/2 lemon, more to taste

3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro.

1. In a large pot, heat 3 tablespoons oil over high heat until hot and shimmering. Add onion and garlic, and saut?ntil golden, about 4 minutes.

2. Stir in tomato paste, cumin, salt, black pepper and chili powder or cayenne, and saut?or 2 minutes longer.

3. Add broth, 2 cups water, lentils and carrot. Bring to a simmer, then partially cover pot and turn heat to medium-low. Simmer until lentils are soft, about 30 minutes. Taste and add salt if necessary.

4. Using an immersion or regular blender or a food processor, pur?half the soup then add it back to pot. Soup should be somewhat chunky.

5. Reheat soup if necessary, then stir in lemon juice and cilantro. Serve soup drizzled with good olive oil and dusted lightly with chili powder if desired.

Yield: 4 servings.

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