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Tuscan White Bean Soup

Makes 4 servings

This smooth soup or velouté is the height of simplicity, but count on diners to ask you for the recipe nevertheless, because its taste is so soothing and delicious. Tuscans favor a variety of small white navy beans, called cannellini, and also use these to make a thicker version, which is spread on *crostini* (toast points) and served as an antipasto. If you leave the carrot out, the soup will be whiter.

1 cup (1/2 pound) dried white beans
1 leafy sprig fresh sage
Salt to taste
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 small onion, finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
1 small carrot, peeled and finely chopped
1/4 cup finely chopped fennel bulb (optional)
2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped

For the Garnish: (choose one)

Twelve 1-inch squares thinly sliced pancetta, cooked until crispy
1 cup croûtons, fried in olive oil until golden
1/2 cup cooked tiny shrimp
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh parsley

1. Place the beans in a pot. Remove 2 leaves of sage from the sprig to use later, then add the sprig to the beans with water to cover by several inches. Bring to a boil over high heat, salt lightly, then cook at a boil until tender, about 1-1/2 hours, replenishing the water when necessary.
2. Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat then add the onion, celery, carrot, fennel, if using, and garlic and cook, stirring, until softened, about 6 minutes.
3. Drain the beans, saving 4 cups of the cooking liquid. Place the beans in a blender with the vegetables from the skillet and 4 cups of the cooking liquid. Blend until smooth. Transfer to a clean pot, add the 2 leaves of sage, and set over low heat. Cook until bubbling and hot, about 5 minutes. Serve hot with one of the garnishes.