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Hot-n-Sour Soup

About 4 quarts or 10-12 servings

Some people turn to chicken noodle soup during a comfort crisis, but our choice nearly every time is a good Hot-n-Sour soup. It's bursting with flavors that titillate the taste senses with its savory, spicy, umami-packed personality. It proves to be the reliable cure for so many tribulations. We like to make a big batch and freeze part for later. The ingredient list is lengthy, but don't let that deter you – once the items are collected, the soup assembles quickly.

Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4 center cut pork chops, (about 1 lb.)
- 3 cloves of garlic, crushed
- 1 oz. dried porcini mushrooms
- 1 oz. dried black wood ear mushrooms
- 8 oz. fresh shiitake mushrooms
- 8 oz. can of sliced bamboo shoots (about 1 cup)
- 1-2 carrots, shredded coarsely (about 1 cup)
- 8 oz. firm tofu
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 2/3 cup cornstarch dissolved in 1/2 cup cold water
- 10 cups chicken stock (homemade or purchased)
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons red pepper flakes
- 3/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt
- 1/3 cup rice wine vinegar, more to taste
- Pinch of sugar
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 3 scallions, thinly sliced, for garnishing
- 2 tablespoons minced cilantro, for garnishing

Prep Directions:

(1) Begin the soup by preparing the pork. To easily slice the pork into thin matchstick size pieces, freeze the 1/2-inch center cut pork chops for 20-30 minutes. This will make the meat very easy to slice thinly. (However, do not allow to freeze more than the allotted time, or the chops will become rock hard and "unsliceable.") When partially frozen, trim away any fatty portions, slice vertically into 1/4-inch pieces. Stack the slices, and slice into matchstick-sized pieces.

(2) Rehydrate the dried porcini mushrooms by soaking in 1.5 cups of boiling water for 15-20 minutes. Weight the top so that the mushrooms stay submerged. Remove the rehydrated mushrooms from the liquid with a slotted spoon. Coarsely chop into 1/2-inch size pieces. Reserve the liquid for adding to the soup later; allow any sediment to settle and pour off 1 cup of the liquid from the top.

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(3) While the pork is freezing and the porcini mushrooms rehydrate, prep the other mushrooms. Gently break the dried wood ears into smaller pieces; they will grow in size as they simmer in the soup. Clean and slice the fresh shiitake mushrooms by thinly slicing with a handheld slicer.

(4) Prep the other vegetables and herbs: Cut the bamboo shoot slices into matchstick-sized pieces. Peel the carrots, shred using a coarse grater. Prepare the herb toppings by slicing the scallions and mincing the cilantro. Set all aside.

(5) Cut the tofu block into matchstick-sized pieces. Beat the eggs lightly with whisk until evenly combined. Set aside both the tofu and eggs for adding to the soup in the final soup assembly steps. Dissolve the cornstarch in cold water; also set aside until the final assembly steps.

Assemble the soup

(6) In a large 5.5 quart enameled cast iron pot, heat the vegetable oil, add the matchstick pieces of pork. Sauté until cooked through with some golden brown edges and fond forming on the bottom of the pot. Add the crushed garlic and sauté an additional minute.

(7) Add the chicken stock to the pot. Add 1 cup of the liquid reserved from rehydrating the porcini mushrooms. As the soup is coming to a boil, add the three types of mushrooms, the bamboo slices, shredded carrot, soy sauce, red pepper flakes, ground white pepper, salt, rice wine vinegar, and the pinch of sugar.

(8) Once the soup is boiling, add the eggs by stirring the pot while simultaneously drizzling in the beaten eggs in a thin stream. Add the tofu matchsticks. Bring the soup to a boil. Gradually add one-half of the cornstarch mixture; allow the soup to reach the boiling point again. Assess the consistency of the soup and add more of the cornstarch slurry a tablespoon at a time until the right consistency is achieved. Allow the soup to regain its boiling point after each cornstarch addition before assessing the need for more. Adjust the seasonings – particularly the vinegar and salt – according to your taste.

(9) Just before serving, add the sesame oil to the soup. Serve in soup bowls and generously garnish with the sliced scallions and minced cilantro.