

COLD SOUPS

"Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language" (from Henry James)

"When one has tasted watermelon, he knows what the angels eat" (from Mark Twain).

"Oh when I look back now / That summer seemed to last forever / And if I had the choice / Yeah, I'd always wanna be there / Those were the best days of my life..." (from Bryan Adams song in Summer of '69)

"In summer, the song sings itself" (from William Carlos Williams)

All these sum up my feelings about summer and its foods. We naturally crave foods that reflect the season that we are in. When you think of summer you think of bright colors, intoxicating aromas, fresh ripe flavors and simple cooking without turning on the oven. A visit to your local Farmers Market adds inspiration. How can you miss?

Chilled soups are one of my favorite things to make in summer using what's available. There are so many delicious variations. I'm including a few of my favorites but don't let these stop you from creating your own using whatever is plentiful in your area.



CHILLED HEIRLOOM TOMATO SOUP WITH SUMMER RELISH

Serves 6 - 8

Unfortunately, regular hothouse tomatoes don't work in this recipe. Wait until you can get great heirloom tomatoes and select the most flavorful, vine-ripened ones you can find. I'd try to use tomatoes of the same color but if you want to be fancy, you could separately do reds and yellows and with two ladles simultaneously pour them into chilled soup plates to create a "yin – yang" effect. For variety I sometimes will add up to a cup or so of freshly juiced cucumber, sweet red bell pepper or carrot to the soup mixture.

4 pounds coarsely chopped ripe tomatoes
1/4 cup balsamic vinegar (or to taste)
Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper
Summer Relish (recipe follows)
Garnish: Sliced avocado fans, yogurt or crème fraiche (recipe follows) and basil oil (recipe follows)

Using a food mill, puree the tomatoes -- a food mill is preferred. In using the food mill, move from the coarsest to the finest blade, depending on the texture you desire. Discard the skins and seeds. If you don't have a food mill you can also use a food processor to puree. Strain pureed tomatoes through a medium mesh strainer, pushing down on the solids with a rubber spatula to capture seeds and skin. Season to your taste with vinegar, salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate until very cold.

To serve, ladle soup into chilled soup bowls. Place 1 or 2 tablespoons of the Summer Relish in the center and garnish with sliced avocado fans, a dollop of yogurt or crème fraiche and a drizzle of basil oil around.

Summer Relish

1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil
2 teaspoons chopped fresh mint
1/4 cup diced red onion
3 tablespoons diced red bell pepper
1/4 cup seeded and diced cucumber (lemon cucumber preferred)
2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a bowl gently combine the relish ingredients. Correct the seasoning with salt and pepper.

Basil oil

Any fresh leafy herb or combination can be used such as mint, chives, cilantro, parsley, shiso, etc.

2 cloves garlic, peeled

3 cups packed herbs; large stems discarded
2 cups or so olive or canola oil
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Add garlic to a deep saucepan with lightly salted boiling water and boil for 1 minute.
Add herbs and stir until they turn a bright green (about 5 seconds).

Drain and plunge immediately into ice water to stop the cooking and set the color. This blanching step inactivates the enzymes which causes the herb to turn brown and develop an oxidized flavor.

Squeeze herbs as dry as you can and add to a blender along with garlic and enough oil to cover by at least 2 inches. Puree till smooth. Strain thru a fine mesh strainer or cheese cloth. I let it drain slowly for an hour or so. Oil should be a very bright green and fragrant. Season with salt and pepper to taste and store covered in refrigerator for up to 3 weeks.

Making Crème Fraiche:

Lots of recipes call for crème fraiche which is similar to sour cream but smoother and richer. In France, where it originates, its body comes from the natural bacteria in unpasteurized cream. In America, however this is nearly impossible for us to get unless you milk your own animals so we can make a good approximation with the following simple recipe. Crème Fraiche is great for cooking because of its rich flavor and stability - it won't break when heated, unlike sour cream.

1 cup heavy cream, preferably natural and not "ultra" pasteurized or processed
2 tablespoons cultured buttermilk
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Stir all together, cover and let sit at room temperature for 6 – 8 hours or until very thick. Refrigerate covered for up to 5 days.

COLD GREEN PEA SOUP

Serves 4

This is a simple beautifully green soup in which you can make all kinds of substitutions such as broccoli or asparagus for some or all of the peas, watercress or spinach for some or all of the romaine and basil, dill or tarragon for some or all of the mint.

2 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 cup chopped green onions including green tops
2 teaspoons chopped garlic
3 cups fresh or frozen sweet peas (about 12 ounces)
2 cups defatted chicken or vegetable stock
1-1/2 cups (packed) finely chopped romaine or other green lettuce
3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint

2/3 cup buttermilk
Salt
Drops of lemon juice
Hot pepper sauce such as Tabasco

Garnish: Chopped mixed fresh herbs of your choice

Heat oil in a deep saucepan, add the green onions and garlic and sauté over moderate heat until softened but not brown, about 3 minutes. Add the peas and stock and bring to a simmer. Cook until peas are just cooked through and remove from heat to cool for a few minutes. Add mixture to a blender and puree. Add romaine and mint and puree again until smooth. Add buttermilk and whiz again till combined. Season to your taste with salt, drops of lemon juice and hot pepper sauce. Strain through a medium strainer and chill. Taste again for seasoning. Ladle into chilled bowls or mugs and top with chopped herbs if desired. Can be made up to a day ahead and stored covered in the refrigerator.

Note: If using fresh peas, you may want to add drops of honey to the soup depending on their maturity.

CHILLED AVOCADO SOUP

Serves 6

3 large ripe avocados; peeled, pitted and chopped
1/4 cup fresh lime or lemon juice
2 teaspoons grated lime or lemon zest
4 cups or so rich corn or chicken stock
1/2 cup plain yogurt
2 teaspoons minced garlic
1 tablespoon fresh ginger juice (crushed in a garlic press)
1 teaspoon minced serrano chile or drops of bottled hot sauce to taste
3 tablespoons fresh chopped cilantro or 2 tablespoons chopped mint
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Garnish: Finely diced, seeded ripe tomato and cucumber, nori strips and tobiko, if desired.

Add ingredients to a food processor or blender (in batches if necessary) and puree until smooth. Thin to desired consistency with additional stock. Chill for an hour or two to allow flavors to blend and serve in chilled bowls with suggested garnishes.

COLD LAYERED AVOCADO AND TOMATO SOUP

Serves 6 – 8

This is a fun soup or first course for a warm day. Use clear, straight-sided glasses or wine glasses to show off the layers of color. Choose ones that hold at least 10 ounces. A large

martini glass can also work. Alternately you can do a “yin yang” presentation in a flat, wide rim soup plate. Be sure to use vine ripe, preferably heirloom tomatoes.

2 pounds ripe tomatoes
3 tablespoons or so white balsamic vinegar, or to taste
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground pepper
2 firm ripe avocados, about 8 ounces each
1 cup defatted chicken or vegetable stock
3 tablespoons sour cream, optional
3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
Drops of your favorite hot sauce to taste
1 small cucumber, 10 – 12 ounces
3 tablespoons chopped shallots or green onions
1 tablespoon chopped cilantro

Wash and core tomatoes and cut into chunks. Puree in a blender or food processor then press through a fine mesh strainer to remove seeds and skin and discard. You should have about 3 cups. Season to taste with the balsamic vinegar, salt and pepper and chill until cold, at least 1 hour.

Peel and pit the avocados, cut into chunks. Add to a blender or food processor along with the stock, sour cream and lime juice and puree till smooth. Season to taste with salt, pepper and drops of hot sauce. Cover surface with plastic wrap and chill until cold, at least 1 hour.

Peel cucumber, cut in half lengthwise and scoop out and discard seeds. Cut into ¼ inch dice. You should have about 1 cup. Gently combine with the shallots and cilantro and season to taste with salt, pepper and vinegar.

To serve: Spoon equal portions of avocado mixture into glasses. Stir tomato mixture to blend and pour carefully on top of avocado. Top with the cucumber salsa and serve immediately.

A SIMPLE GAZPACHO

Serves 4

Here is a quick and easy no-cook soup that can be ready in just a few minutes. Traditional gazpachos which originated in Andalucia in Spain often called for bread and lots of olive oil as part of the mixture to make it more hearty and filling. It was really a poor workingman’s concoction and originally did not include tomatoes until they arrived from the new world. This is a much lighter and refreshing version. All kinds of garnishes are possible from simple basil as I’ve done here to fresh cooked shrimps, crab, sliced hard boiled eggs, etc. for something more elegant.

4 large red vine ripe tomatoes (preferably heirloom), about 2 pounds
1-1/2 cups peeled, seeded and diced cucumber (1/2 inch dice)
2/3 cup diced sweet red onion

1/2 cup stemmed, seeded and diced red bell pepper
1/4 cup or so fragrant extra virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons or so sherry or red wine vinegar
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground pepper
Fresh basil leaves, cut in fine julienne

Place the tomatoes and half of the cucumber, onion and pepper in a food processor and process to a smooth puree. Add the olive oil and 1 tablespoon of the vinegar and process again. Taste and add more olive oil and vinegar to your liking. Push the soup through a medium mesh strainer and discard solids. Season to your taste with salt and pepper. Cover and chill for at least one hour and up to overnight. To serve: stir in remaining vegetables and spoon into chilled bowls, top with basil and a drizzle of olive oil.

CHILLED CORN, JICAMA, AND BUTTERMILK SOUP WITH SHRIMP

Serves 6 to 8

The potato and curry base of this soup can be made ahead in a larger quantity and frozen for use at any time. Any combination of raw vegetables can be used, such as cucumbers, red onions, and sweet peas. The quality of the buttermilk is key to the flavor of the dish. A good “Bulgarian” cultured buttermilk is what I like, or look for a good goat buttermilk

3 tablespoons olive oil
1 1/2 cups chopped onion
1 tablespoon chopped garlic
2 tablespoons peeled and chopped fresh ginger
2 teaspoons good quality curry powder, or to taste
1 teaspoon minced and seeded serrano chiles
1 cup peeled and diced new potatoes
1/2 cup dry white wine
3 cups vegetable or chicken stock
2/3 cup light cream
4 cups buttermilk
2 tablespoons lime juice
3 cups fresh sweet corn kernels, preferably roasted or grilled
3 tablespoons chopped cilantro
1 cup peeled and diced jicama
3/4-pound cooked bay or rock shrimp
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Your favorite hot pepper sauce to taste

Garnish: Chopped fresh chives

In a large saucepan, heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onion, garlic, ginger, curry, and chiles and sauté over moderate heat, until soft but not brown. Add the potatoes, wine and stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until potatoes are very tender.

Remove from the heat and cool. In a blender or food processor, puree the cooled soup base.

Add the cream, buttermilk, lime juice, corn, cilantro, jicama, and shrimp to the chilled soup base. Season to taste with salt, pepper and drops of Tabasco to taste.

Serve cold garnished with chopped chives.

COLD CUCUMBER AND HONEYDEW MELON SOUP WITH CRAB

Serves 6 – 8

The combination of the cucumber and honeydew is an intriguing flavor combination and also visually interesting. Being a west coast boy, I think Dungeness crab is the best but use whatever you like. I've used cream here to add richness to the soup. You could also leave it out or substitute buttermilk if desired. All are good. I recommend serving this in wide shallow bowls for best dramatic effect!

2 quarts roughly chopped peeled and seeded English (burpless!) cucumbers
1 quart roughly chopped and seeded ripe honeydew melon
3 tablespoons or so fresh lemon juice
1 tablespoons sugar
1/3 cup heavy cream
Salt
Drops of hot sauce
10 ounces fresh picked crab meat (1 cup or so)
3/4 cup seeded and diced yellow and/or red tomatoes
1/2 cup diced firm ripe avocado
2 teaspoons each chopped fresh chives and tarragon (or basil)

Garnish: Fresh herb sprigs and/or chopped nasturtium flowers and leaves, if available.

Add cucumbers, melon, 2 tablespoons of lemon juice and sugar to a food processor and puree until smooth. Strain through a medium strainer pushing down on the solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Stir in cream and season to taste with salt and hot sauce. You should end up with about 1 quart of soup. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

Gently combine the crab, tomatoes, avocado and herbs. Season to taste with salt, hot sauce and lemon juice. To serve: Gently press crab mixture into a 1/4 cup or so measuring cup and unmold in the center of a large, flat soup plate. Ladle chilled cucumber mixture around and garnish with herbs and/or nasturtiums.

STRAWBERRY GINGER SOUP

Serves 4

2 1/2 cups strawberry juice (3 pints strawberries)

1-2 tablespoons ginger juice
1 ripe banana
1 cup sparkling apple cider or champagne
4 tablespoons yogurt
1 cup mixed blueberries and red raspberries

Garnish: Mint sprigs

Combine juices and banana in a blender (or use an immersion blender) and blend till smooth. Add sparkling cider and ladle into chilled soup bowls. Serve with a dollop of yogurt, a scattering of fresh berries and a mint sprig or two.

Note: Almost any berry or combination can be used depending on what's in season.

COLD FRESH CANTALOUPE SOUP

Serves 6 - 8

We're seeing many more varieties of melons in the market these days. Use any that you like. I've also made this with other yellow or orange fleshed varieties such as Canary or Crane. For an interesting visual twist, cut the recipe in half and separately puree a green fleshed melon such as honeydew and ladle into bowl simultaneously with cantaloupe soup to create a "yin - yang" effect.

8 cups cantaloupe, seeded, and cut into 1/2-inch chunks
1 cup yogurt
1 cup fruity Gewurztraminer or Riesling wine
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
1 tablespoon honey (or to taste)
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh mint
Salt and drops of hot sauce to taste

Garnish: A swirl of pureed and strained raspberries or blackberries, mint leaves, and edible flower petals, if desired.

In food processor or blender, puree all ingredients except garnish until smooth. Pour into a bowl and chill for at least 2 hours for flavors to blend. Can be made up to a day ahead. Garnish berry puree, mint leaves and flowers.

John Ash 2025