

Leek and Potato Soup with Frizzled Coppa

Nothing humble about this soup, though it begins modestly enough with onions and potatoes, the humblest members of the veg kingdom. First we coax deep flavor from the tops of the leeks for the stock. Then we transform cold, hard potatoes into a velvety, buttery puree. Cream is optional, but the frizzled coppa is not. Enjoy this soup warm on a cool spring day, or serve it chilled as the weather warms. Just call it vichyssoise.

See Cook's Note for instructions on washing leeks.

Ingredients

leek broth

4 to 5 large leeks, about 2 pounds (dark-green tops for broth, whites and light-green parts for soup, below)
4 cups low-sodium chicken broth
6 black peppercorns
5 sprigs fresh thyme
5 sprigs flat-leaf parsley
1 bay leaf

garnish

1 teaspoon extra virgin olive oil
2 thin slices coppa, cut into 1/4-inch strips

soup

3 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 large russet potatoes or other baking potato, about 1½ pounds, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks
1/2 medium yellow onion, halved and sliced
1/2 large shallot, sliced
2 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed with the side of a knife
2 teaspoons kosher salt
6 cups leek broth, from above

to finish

Freshly ground pepper, preferably white
1/2 cup heavy cream, optional

special equipment

mesh strainer
Dutch oven or large pot with cover
blender

Directions

for the broth

Trim the leeks and discard any discolored or damaged outer leaves. Cut off the dark-green tops, reserving the white and light-green parts reserve to use in the soup. Roughly slice tops into 1-inch pieces and wash thoroughly. Put the tops, 4 cups water and remaining broth ingredients in a Dutch oven or large pot and bring to a boil over high heat. The leek tops won't sink until they soften a bit, so resist the temptation to add more liquid to try to cover them. Lower the heat to medium and simmer briskly for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Strain the broth through a mesh strainer into a large bowl and discard solids. You should have at least 6 cups of broth. Rinse out pot and dry.

for the garnish

While broth is simmering, heat the oil in a medium nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add coppa pieces and stir until the meat is brown and crispy, 1 to 3 minutes. Remove to a paper-towel lined plate to drain.

for the soup

Halve the reserved white and light-green parts of leeks lengthwise and cut into 1/2-inch slices, taking care to clean them well. (See Cook's Note.)

Melt the butter in the Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat. Stir in leeks, potatoes, onion, shallot, garlic and salt. Heat, stirring, for 3 minutes, then cover the pot to steam vegetables. Stir occasionally until vegetables are softened, about 10 minutes. Do not let them brown. (Add a splash of water toward the end, if necessary.)

Add 6 cups of the leek broth and bring it to a boil. Simmer, partly covered, until the potatoes are very tender, 10 to 15 minutes.

Allow the soup to cool a bit. Working in batches, carefully puree the soup in a blender. Don't fill the blender jar more than a quarter of the way on any batch. Keep the lid slightly ajar and covered with a thick kitchen towel while blending. When the soup is smooth, transfer it to the cleaned pot or a large bowl. When all the soup is pureed, taste and season with salt and pepper, if desired.

If using the heavy cream, return the pot to medium heat and stir in the cream to warm through.

Ladle the soup into warm bowls and garnish with the crisped coppa.

Cook's Notes

Leeks are often very sandy, so it's critical to wash them thoroughly. Submerge sliced leeks into a large bowl filled with cold water. Use your hands to separate the layers and swish the greens through the water, rinsing off any grit or dirt. Lift the leeks out of the water, letting the dirt fall to the bottom of the bowl. Drying the slices in a salad spinner is a good idea, if you have one.

total time: 1 hour 10 minutes

active prep: 30 minutes

serves: 4-6

difficulty: *easy*