

January Notes from the Coaching Inns' Kitchens

PHEASANT AND CHESTNUT SOUP

After all the excesses of the party season a month of simple eating seems a good way forward. To this end pheasant soup, or its close cousin chicken soup, is perfect, filling and wholesome especially in the long dark evenings of January.

For a hearty soup like this one it's seldom necessary to follow the quantities and ingredients slavishly. Use the recipe below as a general guide but be led by your instinct, taste buds and the contents of your fridge.

The soup is given extra body by the addition of pearl barley. The chestnuts add a nutty sweetness that works particularly well with the gamey flavours of pheasant. Most big supermarkets and good delicatessens sell whole ready-cooked and peeled chestnuts in some shape or form, canned, vacuum packed or in the frozen vegetable section. If they are impossible to find, the soup will work fine without them.

Serves 4 for light lunch or supper or 6-8 as a starter

50 g pearl barley

25 g butter

1 tbsp groundnut or grapeseed oil

1 medium onion

4 celery sticks

2 carrots

2 garlic cloves

1 tsp ground allspice

1l pheasant or chicken stock

1 lemon

1 bay leaf

100 ml sherry or white wine

2 tbsp crème fraîche
100 g whole cooked chestnuts
3 pheasant breasts
100 g greens
Salt and pepper

To serve

Crusty bread and watercress, rocket or other peppery or bitter leaves dressed with olive oil and lemon juice.

40 minutes before you want to eat

Start by cooking the pearl barley. Boil the kettle and place the pearl barley in a large pan with a lid. Pour in enough boiling water to just cover the barley, add a little salt and bring back to the boil. Leave to simmer for 30 minutes with the lid on.

Meanwhile, start the soup. Heat the butter and oil in a large heavy-based pan over a medium heat, while you peel and finely chop the onion. Add the onion to the pan and let it soften for 5 minutes while you trim, wash and slice the celery, and peel and finely chop the carrots.

When the onion is soft, add the carrots and celery to the pan and cook for another 5 minutes or so. Meanwhile, peel and crush the garlic.

Once the celery and carrots have softened a little, add the garlic and allspice to the pan and let them release their flavours for a few minutes. Then add 700 ml of the stock and bring to a simmer. Add a small length of zest from the lemon and the bay leaf, and let it all cook gently for 20 minutes.

In the meantime, skin the pheasant breasts and cut into small chunks. Place the remaining stock in a small pan with a lid and add the pieces of pheasant and the sherry or wine. When the stock comes up to a simmer crumble in the chestnuts. Let this mixture simmer away gently with the lid on for about 10 minutes. It will be used to thicken the soup.

While everything is simmering away, prepare the remaining ingredients. Roughly chop the parsley. Squeeze the juice from the lemon and wash and shred the greens. Throw the greens in with the other vegetables and stock.

Once the pheasant meat is just cooked, add the crème fraiche, parsley and lemon juice. Whizz this mixture to a smooth purée, either in a food processor or with a hand blender.

Add the purée to the soup – it should thicken it considerably. Taste the soup and season as necessary with salt and pepper.

When the barley is cooked, drain it and add it to the soup. Leave to heat through really gently for 5–7 minutes – don't at any point let the boil. If the soup seems very thick, you can thin it with a little hot water or more stock if you have any.

Serve in the soup in big bowls with green salad and crusty bread.

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