

Cook's corner | Soups offer comfort by the bowl

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(Photo: cj)

Brrr! Everyone needs ideas for warm and filling soups about now. Readers have asked about restaurant soups, some homey, some fancy, which will steam up your glasses and warm your belly.

One reader found a delicious soup at The Oakroom of the Seelbach Hilton, 500 S. Fourth St. It's the Vidalia onion bisque with Gruyere grilled cheese, chive and Benton's bacon (which is no longer on the menu). While this certainly has a fancy-sounding name, it is not hard to make, though it takes some patience to slowly cook down the onions to a rich, deep brown color that releases all their sweetness. You can make your own thick-sliced Texas toast, or use a prepared product, which I found in the frozen food department.

Another reader asked for the recipe for the "great soup" she had at 211 Clover Lane Restaurant, 211 Clover Lane in St. Matthews, the Tuscan garlic soup. Chef Troy Schuster shared the recipe for this popular offering.

And another reader requested the recipe for the "most delicious" butternut squash bisque she enjoyed at The Glitz, a cafe that is part of the Irish Acres Gallery, 4205 Fords Mill Road, Versailles.

211 Clover Lane's Tuscan garlic soup

5 whole bulbs fresh garlic

1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil

3 tablespoons butter

1 yellow onion, peeled and sliced into half-moons

1 quart chicken broth

1 bay leaf

2 sprigs fresh thyme

4 1-inch slices baguette

Salt and pepper

Slice the top ½ inch or so off 4 bulbs of garlic to expose the flesh of the cloves (this will make it easier to remove the roasted flesh). Place garlic in a small pan and drizzle with olive oil and a splash of water. Cover with aluminum foil and bake in the oven until soft, about 1 hour at 350 degrees.

Separate the cloves of the last bulb of garlic, peel them and put them through a garlic press. On medium high heat melt the butter and sauté the onions and garlic until translucent, but do not let onions turn brown. Add chicken stock and bay leaf.

When the roasted garlic is soft enough to pierce with a fork, remove and, when cool enough to handle, squeeze the roasted garlic out of its peel into the soup. Add fresh thyme and let simmer for about 20 minutes. Add the bread and simmer for another 10 minutes. Remove thyme sprig and bay leaf; add salt and pepper and puree in a blender or with an immersion blender. Serves 4.

The Glitz's butternut squash bisque

2 medium butternut squash (enough to make 8 cups of puree)

8 cups whole milk

4 bay leaves

1 large white onion, sliced

1 tablespoon sugar

1 teaspoon nutmeg

1½ teaspoons curry powder

½ teaspoon dry mustard

¾ teaspoon white pepper

1 tablespoon salt

2 tablespoons pure maple syrup

1 cup roasted red pepper puree (see note)

Peel, remove the seeds and cut the butternut squash into chunks. Steam in a metal colander over boiling water until completely softened. Puree in a blender. Set aside.

Place milk, bay leaves and onion in a heavy saucepan. Bring to a very low simmer and simmer for 30 minutes. Strain bay leaves and onion from the milk. Return the milk to the saucepan and discard the bay leaves and the onion.

Add squash puree to the milk and whisk to blend completely. Whisk in remaining ingredients and simmer until completely hot; do not boil. Serves 6.

Note: You can use canned roasted red peppers. Drain, rinse and puree in the blender.

The Oakroom's Vidalia onion

bisque with Gruyere grilled cheese,

chives and Benton's bacon

3 pounds Vidalia onions

4 tablespoons butter

½ cup sherry

¼ cup bourbon

1 pint heavy cream

3 slices Benton's bacon

½ cup Gruyere cheese, grated

¼ cup cream

Two slices of Texas toast, cut into 1-inch cubes

¼ cup coarsely chopped chives

Peel onions and slice into very thin rounds. In a large heavy pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the sliced onions, and cook, stirring until they soften and start to turn translucent.

Lower the heat and continue to cook, stirring from time to time, for 2 hours or more. Onions will reduce in volume substantially and turn deep brown. Be careful not to burn.

Add the sherry and bourbon and deglaze the pan — when the liquids start to simmer, use a wooden spoon to stir and scrape up the browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Continue to cook until the bourbon and sherry are reduced by half. Add the pint of cream, stirring to blend well. Remove from heat and puree, in a blender or with an immersion stick blender. Return to very low heat.

Heat a skillet over medium heat. Add the bacon and cook until crisp. Drain and crumble. Set aside.

Combine the grated Gruyere and cream and melt in a small pan over medium-low heat. Stir to blend.

With a small, sharp knife, carve out a hollow in the toast cubes. Fill cavities with melted Gruyere fondue. (Piping in with a pastry bag, or with a zipper plastic bag with the corner cut off, is easiest.)

To serve, scatter two tablespoons or so of bacon crumbles on the bottom of a serving bowl. Fill with hot bisque. Float a cube of cheese-filled toast on top. Garnish with chives. Serves 6.

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