

Hearty Bison and Barley Soup

By Heather Ostern

INGREDIENTS

1/2 pound of bacon, cut into 1/4-inch strips
1 large yellow or white onion, chopped (about 1 1/2 cups)
3 large carrots, diced (2/3 to 1 cup)
3 large ribs celery, diced (2/3 cup)
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 cloves garlic, minced (about 2 teaspoons)
1 pound of pearl barley, rinsed and set aside for later use (follow directions on the bag)
8-10 cups water, depending on the consistency you prefer for your soup.
2 cups of homemade bison broth* (see my recipe for homemade bison broth)
1/2 teaspoon dry thyme
1 bay leaf
1/2 pound or 3 links of sliced Bison Kielbasa, (you can use regular Italian sausage if needed)
1 1/2 teaspoon sherry cooking wine (you can substitute cider vinegar)
1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley

Serving Size: This recipe serves about 5 adults.

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat a large frying pan and cook the bacon for about 9 to 10 minutes on medium heat until it is browned. Take the bacon out of the frying pan and set it aside. Drain bacon fat out of the pan into a glass measuring cup.
2. Use 2 tablespoons of the bacon fat to cook the onions, celery, and carrots, adding the cumin once the vegetables have been thrown in the pan. Stir the cumin into the vegetables with a wooden spoon, loosening any browned morsels at the bottom of the pan since they provide wonderful flavor to the vegetables. Cook for about 7 minutes. As the vegetables begin to soften, toss in the garlic. Cook for 30 seconds, steadily stirring the mixture so that the garlic becomes fragrant, not burned!
3. Transfer the vegetable mixture into an 8 quart pot with a thick bottom that will resist burning! Save the frying pan for later use. Now add the bacon into the large pot along with the stock, water, thyme, bay leaf and the pearl barley. Remember to rinse the barley BEFORE you add it to the pot. Finally, add one teaspoon of salt.

4. Bring the pot to a boil and then simmer for about 30 to 40 minutes, stirring frequently in order to prevent the barley from sticking to the bottom of the pan and burning. Note: Once the pot begins to boil, it's important not to become side tracked because barley likes to congregate at the bottom of the pan...which could spell DISASTER instead of DINNER!
5. BEFORE the pot begins to boil, make sure the Bison Kielbasa is sliced into bite size pieces. I like to halve the coin sized pieces of Kielbasa in order to incorporate them throughout the soup. Using your frying pan again, heat up the sliced Bison Kielbasa. Brown the Kielbasa just enough to provide some color. Put the lid on the frying pan and move it to a cool burner.
6. As the soup simmers, taste the barley intermittently. The barley should be chewy without becoming mushy! At the same time, the vegetables need to be soft rather than crunchy, so there's a balancing act that occurs during this part of the recipe. If your vegetables were diced too thick...it may be difficult to strike this balance.
7. During the last 10 or 15 minutes of cooking, add your Bison sausage to the pot, along with the sherry wine and the fresh parsley. Taste the soup near the end of the cook time to avoid over seasoning. Both bacon and sausage are loaded with salt. You can always add salt, but once it's in there...you can't take it out! Include salt and pepper as needed to the soup.

Note:

If you don't like barley, then you can use yellow split peas. It's a wonderful way to make easy, split pea soup without having to cook it all day. Additionally, the gold color with the orange carrots and green parsley make for a wonderful fall soup that I usually serve to those who help us with our Bison round up! They all love it!

If you choose to use split peas, then the ratio of liquid added to the pot changes and you may need double the recipe in order to get a larger amount. When I make this recipe with split peas, I use 2 cups of Bison stock to about 5 or 6 cups of water. Again, just add water to the consistency that you desire for soup.