

BUONA DOMENICA

Zuppa di Cavolo Verza e Fagioli Tondini del Tavo | Savoy Cabbage and Round Bean Soup

Fagioli Tondini del Tavo are an heirloom bean from Abruzzo, especially around the province of Pescara. If you visit the region, be sure to pop into an alimentari and buy a bag to bring home. In the meantime, use any good white bean, such as cannellini or French navy beans, for this soup. I almost always recommend starting with dried beans over canned, especially when the beans are a star ingredient, as they are here. You'll need to soak them overnight and then cook them before adding them to the soup, along with their cooking liquid.

Makes 4-6 servings

INGREDIENTS

1 cup (200 g) dried white beans, such as Cannellini, French Navy Beans, or Small White Beans (see NOTE)
Pinch of baking soda
1 clove garlic, a branch of rosemary, and a branch of sage for cooking the beans
Extra-virgin olive oil
Fine salt
1 medium carrot
1 rib celery, with leaves, if possible)
1 large or 2 small leeks, white and light green parts
1 large yellow potato, such as Yukon gold
A few sprigs fresh thyme
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
Freshly ground black pepper
1 small head (1 pound / 500 g) Savoy cabbage
1/2 cup (120 ml) tomato passata (purée), or more to taste
1 quart (1 L) homemade or best-quality commercial vegetable or chicken broth

For serving:

Thick slices of country bread
1 clove garlic, lightly crushed
Top quality extra-virgin olive oil

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Prepare the beans. Soak them overnight in cold water with a pinch of baking soda, then drain them and put them in a heavy-bottomed pot with water to cover by 2 inches (5 cm). Crush the garlic clove lightly and remove the peel. Add it to the pot, along with the herbs. Drizzle in about 1 tablespoon olive oil and set the pot over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil and skim off any foam that rises to the surface. Lower the heat to medium-low or low to maintain a gentle simmer. Cover partially and cook the beans until tender. Cooking time will depend on the type of bean and should take anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. Towards the end of cooking, add two pinches of salt, enough to flavor the beans and their liquid. When they're ready, remove any herb branches and the garlic if it hasn't fallen apart. If not using right away, transfer the beans and their broth to containers and refrigerate or freeze. (They freeze well and will keep for several months.)
2. Pour 3 to 4 tablespoons olive oil into a Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot. Finely chop the carrot and celery. Slice the white and light green parts of the leek into rounds and rinse well in a colander under running water to remove any grit. Add the vegetables to the olive oil and set over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring to prevent any browning, until softened and translucent, about 7 minutes.
3. Peel and cut the potato into 1/2-inch (1-cm) dice and add them to the pot, along with 3 or 4 small sprigs of thyme and the chopped parsley. Season lightly with salt and pepper and cook, stirring to coat the potatoes with oil. Add a splash of water or, better yet, broth from the beans, to keep the potatoes from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Cook for about 5 minutes, until slightly softened.
4. While the potatoes are cooking, cut the cabbage into quarters and remove the core. Cut each wedge crosswise into strips. Add the cabbage to the pot (it will fill the pot) and cover for a couple of minutes to allow it to wilt. Uncover and stir it once or twice. When it's wilted, stir in the tomato purée, and simmer another 5 minutes or so to allow the potatoes and cabbage to absorb some of the tomato.
5. Add the beans and their broth, however much it is, and bring to a simmer. Then pour in the vegetable broth. You may not need to add the full amount, depending on how much bean liquid there is. When the soup returns to a simmer, lower the heat, and cover partially. Simmer gently for about 90 minutes. It sounds like a lot but trust me. The soup will thicken nicely, and the cabbage will become meltingly tender.

6. When the soup is ready, turn on the broiler. Arrange the bread slices on a baking sheet and broil until browned. Lightly crush a clove of garlic and rub it over the slices, then drizzle olive oil on top. Serve the soup with a slice or two of bread tucked into the bowl.

NOTE: I never cook just 1 cup of dried beans (seems a waste of time). I usually cook an entire bag/package, use what I need, and freeze the rest. 1 cup of dried beans yields about 3 cups cooked, so if, like me, you've cooked more, measure out 3 cups for the soup.