

## Midwinter Minestrone – Comfort du Jour

I finally pulled out our 7-quart cast-iron Dutch oven and made this soup that never fails to chase away the midwinter blues—a steaming hot bowl of Italian flavor that is chock-full of fresh, nutritious vegetables, spicy Italian sausage, creamy beans and petite pasta.

This recipe makes about 4 or 5 quarts. You will need a large soup pot, slow cooker or Dutch oven to hold all the ingredients, but the recipe can easily be halved for a more manageable batch. This soup also freezes well, so you can easily save some for another gloomy day.

### PANTRY INGREDIENTS

- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 Tbsp. fresh chopped garlic
- 1 carton low-sodium vegetable broth
- 1 carton low-sodium chicken broth\* (see notes)
- 28 oz. can whole peeled tomatoes in tomato puree (San Marzano preferred)
- 15 oz. can white kidney beans, drained and rinsed (cannellini)
- 15 oz. can dark red kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- 2 tsp. Mamma Mia Seasoning blend (below, or another salt-free Italian seasoning)
- 2 cups dry ditalini (or other petite shaped pasta, such as small elbows or mini farfalle)

### FRESH INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 cup chopped carrots
- 1 cup each green and red bell peppers, chopped
- 1/2 bulb fennel, sliced and chopped\*
- 8 oz. cremini mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
- 1 fat handful kale leaves, chopped very small\*
- 1 handful fresh Italian (flat leaf) parsley, cleaned and finely chopped
- 1 or 2 lbs. bulk Italian sausage\* (see notes)
- Extra virgin olive oil, salt and pepper (of course)
- Parmesan rind, if you have one\*

### \*NOTES

Minestrone is perfectly adaptable for a vegetarian, or even vegan, option. Simply swap more vegetable broth for the chicken broth and skip the sausage in favor of additional beans. For texture and interest, I'd recommend a can of garbanzo beans in place of the meat.

Fennel provides a real Italian flavor to minestrone, and the flavor is echoed in my Mamma Mia seasoning, which includes ground fennel seed. It has a crunchy texture that is similar to celery, and a slight licorice flavor that blends well with the other ingredients. Use only the white bulb part of the vegetable (see the slides for more description).

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Any type of kale can be used in minestrone. Lacinato kale is commonly used in Italian cooking, but I used curly kale. If you prefer, you could also substitute about 1 1/2 cups finely shredded and chopped green cabbage. These hearty greens add texture and fiber to the soup.

You decide how much sausage, if any, you use in this recipe. My batch included only 1 pound this time, and I used a chicken sausage that was labeled “hot Italian.” Turkey or pork sausage would also work or as mentioned above, you could omit the meat altogether if you’re taking it vegan.

When we make a new batch of parm-romano cheese blend, we save the rinds in the fridge or freezer. They add fantastic flavor to simmering soups or sauces. This is not necessary for the recipe, though.

If you decide to use a slow cooker to finish the soup, transfer everything at the end of step 4 below.

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. In a large soup pot or dutch oven, heat 4 Tbsp. olive oil over medium-high heat. Add sausage and cook until browned, breaking up larger pieces with a spoon or wooden utensil.
2. Add chopped onions, carrots, celery, peppers, fennel and garlic. Season with salt and pepper. Stir and cook until vegetables soften, and the moisture released from them has mostly evaporated.
3. Scatter Italian seasoning blend over the ingredients and stir to combine.
4. Move the sausage and vegetables to the outer edges of the pot and drizzle another tablespoon of olive oil in the center. Toss in the mushrooms, half at a time, and gently toss them around to lightly brown them.
5. Add the whole plum tomatoes, squeezing each thoroughly by hand directly into the pot. This will assist in breaking down the tomatoes for quicker cooking. Empty all puree into the pot as well.
6. Add the vegetable and chicken broths and stir to combine. Heat soup to a low boiling point, then reduce heat to a simmer. This will take about 15 minutes.
7. Stir in finely chopped kale and stir. Add parmesan rind and allow it to simmer with the soup for a few hours.
8. Near the end of your expected cooking time, drain and rinse the canned beans. Season them with salt and pepper before adding them to the soup.
9. Fill a large pot with water and cook the ditalini (or other petite pasta) to al dente texture. Drain pasta and add to the soup just before serving. Alternatively, drain the pasta, toss with a small amount of oil to prevent sticking, and transfer it to a separate bowl to be added to soup as it’s served. This will help you enjoy the soup several days later, without mushy noodles.