

White Borscht – Comfort du Jour

Most borscht recipes are based on red beets, but this version, named “white borscht” by chef and author Gabrielle Hamilton, features potatoes and kielbasa. The recipe suggests a shortcut to the nuanced sour flavor of an Eastern European soup; it involves simmering a hunk of sourdough bread and then pureeing it into a smooth mixture that is added back to the soup. This method of soaking and pureeing the bread was a genius move by the author, as it gave the soup a sturdy, almost creamy, texture, as well as a distinctive sour flavor. Always more to learn in the world of food, isn't there?

Adapted from <https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1021711-white-borscht>

Note: The original recipe linked above is only available to paid subscribers of New York Times Cooking (which I am), but my adaptation is very close to the original, except for a few substitutions mentioned below and the fact that I halved the original recipe for our family of two.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb. smoked turkey kielbasa, cut into three or four pieces (*the original recipe suggested pork kielbasa*)
6 cups filtered water
2 bay leaves
4 Tbsp. salted butter, divided (*the original recipe used twice as much*)
1 medium yellow onion, chopped
3 cloves garlic, smashed and minced
1 large leek, cleaned and cut into thin half-moon slices
Kosher salt and about 1 tsp. ground black pepper
A large piece of dense sourdough bread*, crusts trimmed (see notes)
1 1/2 lbs. russet potatoes, peeled
About 1 cup chicken or vegetable broth*
Sour cream and fresh dill for serving

*NOTES

Note that *real* sourdough bread is made from a sourdough starter. Some grocery bakeries take a shortcut that embellishes yeast bread with citric acid, and it is not the same. If you don't make your own sourdough bread, consider picking up a loaf from an authentic bakery or use a (seedless) rye.

The recipe that inspired me did not call for broth, other than the one created by simmering the kielbasa, but in my first-attempt jitters, I accidentally simmered my soup longer than I should have and needed more liquid to keep it from becoming mashed potatoes. It isn't a bad idea to have some broth at the ready for this purpose. I used a version of vegetable broth called “No-Chicken” broth, and it was perfect for making up the difference in liquid without affecting flavor.

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INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the kielbasa chunks in a large soup pot and cover it with the filtered water. Add the bay leaves and bring to a boil, then reduce heat to a simmer for about 20 minutes.
2. Prep the potatoes by cutting off the sides and ends, creating mostly flat sides on the potato. Keep the potato scraps in one pile and cube up the rest into a separate pile.
3. After simmering, the kielbasa should be noticeably swollen, and small droplets of fat from the kielbasa will be swirled throughout the broth. Use tongs to transfer the kielbasa to a cutting board. Pour the broth into a large bowl or measuring pitcher.
4. Into the same pot, melt two tablespoons of the butter and sauté the yellow onions and garlic with salt and pepper for about five minutes, until tender. Add the remaining butter and leeks to the pot and sauté two more minutes, until those are also tender.
5. Add the scraps of potato and the large chunks of sourdough bread to the pot. Pour about 2/3 of the reserved broth into the pot and simmer until the bread looks completely bloated, about 10 minutes. Use a large, slotted spoon or tongs to pull out the sopping bread into the measuring pitcher with the remaining reserved broth. It's OK if some of the leeks and onions tag along. Set the pitcher aside to cool for a few minutes.
6. Add the potato cubes to the pot, along with enough broth or water to just cover them. Heat to a boil and then simmer for about 15 minutes until potatoes are slightly tender. While that simmers, use an immersion blender to puree the sopping sourdough with the liquid in the bowl or pitcher.
7. Stir the puree mixture back into the pot, along with the kielbasa. Adjust salt and pepper to taste. Simmer just until heated through, as continued cooking will cause the potatoes to turn mushy.
8. Serve the white borscht with a dollop of sour cream and a sprinkling of fresh dill.