

White Bean and Kale Soup with Smoked Ham Hock

1/2 cup olive oil, portioned out for different uses.
3 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed
2 stalks celery, roughly chopped
1 largish carrot, roughly chopped
1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped
8 cups chicken stock
2 1/2 cups cannellini or Great Northern beans, soaked overnight and drained
1 bouquet garni (1 tsp. whole black peppercorns, 2 each bay leaves, sprigs rosemary, and thyme tied up in cheesecloth)
1 large, meaty smoked ham hock
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
6 stalks lacinato or regular kale (stems thinly sliced, leaves halved lengthwise and thinly sliced)

Heat 1/4 cup of the oil in an 8-qt. saucepan over medium-high (actually we got away with about 2TB, use what works for you). Cook garlic, celery, carrot, and onion until golden, 10–12 minutes.

Add stock, beans, bouquet garni, and ham hock and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer, covered slightly, until beans are mushy, 1–1 1/2 hours give or take.

Remove and dispose of the bouquet garni. Transfer ham hock to a plate (or as we prefer, a teflon frying pan for easy clean up) and let cool. Discard the skin and bone and shred the meat. Transfer half the beans to a bowl; set aside. Using an immersion or regular blender, purée soup until very smooth.

Stir in reserved beans, salt, and pepper, tasting for seasoning and keep warm if using right away. Hopefully you've gotten that really big ham hock and have lots of meat. If so, put half of the shredded meat into the soup.

You can easily stop at this point and refrigerate the soup for finishing just before eating.

Heat 2 tbsp. oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high. Cook the sliced kale stems until tender, 3 to 5 minutes or so. Add the sliced kale leaves, salt, and pepper; cook until leaves are wilted, 2–3 minutes or so, and stir into soup.

Add remaining oil to skillet; cook shredded pork until crisp, 6–8 minutes.

Ladle soup into heated bowls (we always heat just about all our dinnerware); top with crispy pork. We also like a nice crunchy baguette of French bread or sourdough to go with it.

Notes

Why haven't we said how many this recipe serves? Because we don't know how much you eat

and how you are eating it. Is this a soup before dinner or is it dinner? Are you very hungry or not? Did you find a nice big ham hock with lots of meat that is going to feed more? The original of the recipe above 'says' it serves 8.

When we made it for the first time, we made a 2/3rd recipe and two people ate all of it (we were very full). Besides, what's the difference between 2/3rds of a carrot or stalk of celery and a whole carrot or stalk of celery. Given size variation, really nothing. The only place where we stuck to it was with the stock (we used 6 cups) and the beans (about 2 cups). The rest? Pretty much as it reads. So don't sweat the details on the size and amounts of things, just use common sense and, we say, aim for more and have the leftovers for breakfast or lunch. Straying from the original recipe, we suspect we used a lot more meat than the ham hock than they were planning on and we think it should have more kale than they called for (we already upped the amount in the recipe above, use less if you don't think you are a fan). When it comes to soup, you don't much need a recipe, but just mix together all the stuff you like and see what you get. Still, this one guides you and the crispy pork on top is a nice touch we haven't seen often.