

## Wild Rice and Mushroom Soup

SERVES 6 TO 8

White mushrooms can be substituted for the cremini mushrooms. We use a spice grinder to process the dried shiitake mushrooms, but a blender also works.

- ¼ ounce dried shiitake mushrooms, rinsed
- 4¼ cups water
- 1 sprig fresh thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 5 garlic cloves, peeled (1 whole, 4 minced)
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup wild rice
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 pound cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced ¼ inch thick
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1 teaspoon tomato paste
- ¾ cup dry sherry
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup minced fresh chives
- ¼ teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Grind shiitake mushrooms in spice grinder until finely ground (you should have about 3 tablespoons).

2. Bring 4 cups water, thyme sprig, bay leaf, garlic clove, ¾ teaspoon salt, and baking soda to boil in medium saucepan over high heat. Add rice and return to boil. Cover saucepan, transfer to oven, and bake until rice is tender, 35 to 50 minutes. Strain rice through fine-mesh strainer set in 4-cup liquid measuring cup; discard thyme sprig, bay leaf, and garlic clove. Add enough water to reserved cooking liquid to measure 3 cups.

3. Melt butter in Dutch oven over high heat. Add cremini mushrooms, onion, minced garlic, tomato paste, ¼ teaspoon salt, and 1 teaspoon pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are browned and dark fond develops on bottom of pot, 15 minutes. Add sherry, scraping up any browned bits, and cook until reduced and pot is almost dry, about 2 minutes. Add ground shiitake mushrooms, reserved rice cooking liquid, broth, and soy sauce and bring to boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until onion and mushrooms are tender, about 20 minutes.

4. Whisk cornstarch and remaining ¼ cup water in small bowl. Stir cornstarch slurry into soup, return to simmer, and cook until thickened, about 2 minutes. Remove pot from heat and stir in cooked rice, cream, chives, and lemon zest. Cover and let stand for 20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve.



## BUTTERNUT SQUASH SOUP

**WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:** Butternut squash soup strikes a perfect balance between nuttiness and sweetness. But getting that balance right depends on selecting just a few key ingredients so the sweet squash flavor can take center stage.

We found our answer to intense squash flavor in the squash's seeds and fibers. We sautéed shallots and butter with the seeds and fibers, simmered them in water, then used the liquid to steam the unpeeled quartered squash (thereby eliminating the pesky task of peeling raw squash). Once cooled, we scooped the flesh from the skin and pureed the squash with the steaming liquid (strained of seeds and fibers) for a soup with a perfectly smooth texture. A little dark brown sugar added to the soup also intensified the sweetness of the squash. Finally, we enriched the soup with a splash of heavy cream and a pinch of nutmeg to round out this velvety soup's rich flavors.

### Butternut Squash Soup

SERVES 4 TO 6

Lightly toasted pumpkin seeds, drizzles of balsamic vinegar, or sprinklings of paprika or cracked black pepper make appealing accompaniments to this soup.

- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 1 large shallot, minced (about ¼ cup)
- 3 pounds butternut squash (about 1 large squash), cut in half lengthwise, each half cut in half widthwise; seeds and fibers scraped out and reserved
- 6 cups water
- Table salt
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon dark brown sugar
- Pinch grated nutmeg

1. Melt the butter in a large Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the shallot and cook, stirring frequently, until translucent, about 3 minutes. Add the seeds and fibers from the squash and cook, stirring occasionally, until the butter turns a saffron color, about 4 minutes.

2. Add the water and 1 teaspoon salt to the pot and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low, place the squash, cut side down, in a steamer basket, and lower the basket into the pot. Cover and steam until the squash is completely tender, about 30 minutes. Take the pot off the heat and use tongs to transfer the squash to a rimmed baking sheet. When cool enough to handle, use a large spoon to scrape the flesh from the skin. Reserve the squash flesh in a bowl and discard the skin.

3. Strain the steaming liquid through a fine-mesh strainer into a second bowl; discard the solids in the strainer. (You should have 2½ to 3 cups liquid.) Rinse and dry the pot.

4. Working in batches and filling the blender jar only halfway for each batch, puree the squash, adding enough reserved steaming liquid to obtain a smooth consistency. Transfer the puree to the clean pot and stir in the remaining steaming liquid, the cream, and brown sugar. Warm the soup over medium-low heat until hot, about 3 minutes. Stir in the nutmeg, season with salt to taste, and serve. (The soup can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days. Warm over low heat until hot; do not boil.)

## SWEET POTATO SOUP

**WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:** The secrets to a creamy sweet potato soup are to use the peels and turn off the heat. Most recipes call for so many other ingredients that the sweet potato flavor ends up muted and overpowered. By cutting back to shallot, thyme, and butter and using water instead of broth, we put the focus on the main ingredient. For extra earthiness, we also pureed some of the potato skins into the soup. However, the real key to intensifying the sweet potato flavor was to use only a minimal amount of flavor-diluting water. To do so, we let the sweet potatoes sit in hot water off heat to make use of an enzyme that converts their starch content to sugar. Less starch meant we could create a soup with less water, keeping the sweet potato flavor in the forefront.

### Sweet Potato Soup

SERVES 4 TO 6 AS A MAIN DISH OR 8 AS A STARTER

To highlight the earthiness of the sweet potatoes, we incorporate a quarter of the skins into the soup. In addition to the chives, serve the soup with one of our suggested garnishes (recipes follow). The garnish can be prepared during step 1 while the sweet potatoes stand in the water.

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 4¼ cups water, plus extra as needed

## NOTES FROM THE TEST KITCHEN

### PUTTING PEELS TO WORK

Instead of discarding the sweet potato peels, we blend some of them into our soup to take advantage of an earthy-tasting compound they contain called methoxy pyrazine.



Because the compound in the peels is potent—it's detectable in water in levels as low as one part per trillion—we use only one-quarter of the peels in order to avoid overwhelming the soup.

- 2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled, halved lengthwise, and sliced ¼ inch thick, ¼ of peels reserved
- 1 tablespoon packed brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon cider vinegar
- Salt and pepper
- Minced fresh chives

1. Melt butter in large saucepan over medium-low heat. Add shallot and thyme sprigs and cook until shallot is softened but not browned, about 5 minutes. Add water, increase heat to high, and bring to simmer. Remove pot from heat, add sweet potatoes and reserved peels, and let stand uncovered for 20 minutes.

2. Add sugar, vinegar, 1½ teaspoons salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Bring to simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook until potatoes are very soft, about 10 minutes.

3. Discard thyme sprigs. Working in batches, process soup in blender until smooth, 45 to 60 seconds. Return soup to clean pot. Bring to simmer over medium heat, adjusting consistency with extra water if desired. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, topping each portion with sprinkle of chives.

### Buttery Rye Croutons

MAKES 1½ CUPS

The croutons can be made ahead and stored in an airtight container for up to 1 week.

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 slices light rye bread, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 1½ cups)
- Salt

Heat butter and oil in 10-inch skillet over medium heat. When foaming subsides, add bread cubes and cook, stirring frequently, until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Transfer croutons to paper towel-lined plate and season with salt to taste.