

The Ultimate Vegetable Broth

Time: 20 minutes to prep and 1 1/4 hours to simmer

We hate to begin a recipe for vegetable broth with a glowing disquisition on meat, so we won't, but one thing is certain: cooking vegetables can be much tougher than cooking meat. Throw a chop in a skillet and get the prelude to a pan sauce with bronzed drippings and juices. Simmer fleshy bones in water and be rewarded, for only modest effort, with a couple of quarts of liquid gold in the form of stock, the foundation of flavor depth and body in virtually every dish. Draw vegetables into a meal's leading role, however, and you often discover a labor to return ratio that is the inverse of meat's. It's also six hours later. But should you wish, for reasons of personal ethics, health, or preference, to create vegetarian dishes, dishes of light, singing delicacy, dishes that rise to the task of flavor layering, a fine homemade vegetable broth is the first and most crucial step.

Don't think you can buy your way out of this one: canned or boxed vegetable broth is even more vile and bogus than the commercial version of chicken broth—if that is possible. And though it may seem crazy to relegate so many fine, upstanding vegetables to the compost pile, it won't seem crazy when you taste a simple plate of broccoli florets, flash-simmered and infused with this broth, then finished with olive oil, lemon and garlic. Or when your next vegetable soup looks not in vain to water for flavor. Or when you taste our Carolina Gold Rice Grits Cakes.

Equipment *Mise en Place*

For this recipe you will need a heavy-bottomed 8-quart stockpot with a lid, a wooden spoon, a large fine-mesh strainer, and a large heatproof bowl.

Ingredients

2 medium yellow onions, peeled and chopped

3 large shallots, peeled and sliced

2 large or 4 small leeks, white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, washed well, and sliced

1 garlic head, unpeeled, and halved

2 small celery ribs, chopped

2 small carrots, peeled and chopped

Vegetable oil spray

Cooking Notes

Without proper supervision, vegetable broth can easily drift into the dangerous waters of sweet vegetable tea. This happens when too many members of the onion family get together for a reunion and invite only their immediate relatives. Any broth or stock needs a fair representation of aromatics, but without the infusion of meat, a vegetable broth requires careful attention to balance. Here, we bring balance in the form of collard greens (bracing but not sulfurous) and cauliflower (soulful and delicate, not pushy like your average crucivore). Slices of winter squash, seeds and all, impart both depth and dimension to this broth. The splendid reedy tang of bruised lemongrass catches the attention of all the other vegetables. Okay, now, everyone in the pool!

If 'tis not the season for winter squash, feel free to omit it. The squash isn't a make-or-break proposition for this recipe, but its glycerin contribution offers a silky weight and density to the body of the broth as well as a softly, sweet floral counterpoint to the other vegetables.

This broth freezes well.

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3 quarts spring or filtered water

1 small cauliflower (12 ounces), trimmed of stem and leaves, sliced

1 acorn squash or the bulb end of a butternut squash, unpeeled and with seeds, cut crosswise into 5 slices, each about 1/2 inch thick

1 bay leaf

2 teaspoons fine sea salt

2 teaspoons black peppercorns

1 bunch collard greens (12 ounces), washed and chopped

1 bunch flat-leaf parsley, washed, shaken dry and coarsely chopped

2 scallions, washed and trimmed

1 stalk lemongrass, trimmed to the bottom 6 inches and bruised with the back of a chef's knife, or 1 lemon, halved

Directions

1. Toss the onions, shallots, leeks, garlic, celery, and carrots in a heavy-bottomed 8-quart stockpot and spray with vegetable oil spray for 10 seconds. Stir well to coat. Cover the pot and cook the vegetables over low heat, stirring occasionally, until they are softened, fragrant, and beginning to color, about 30 minutes. (If, after 30 minutes, the vegetables have not begun to color, uncover the pot and cook 15 minutes more.)

2. Increase the heat to medium-high and add the water, cauliflower, squash, bay leaf, salt, and peppercorns. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, until the vegetables are spent, about 30 minutes, adjusting the heat as needed to maintain a gentle but active simmer. Add the collard greens and parsley, pushing them into the liquid, and simmer for 10 minutes. Chop the scallions and add them to the pot along with the lemongrass or halved lemon. Remove from the heat and let steep for 5 minutes. Strain the broth through a large fine-mesh strainer into a large heatproof bowl.

Makes about 2 quarts