



"Cooler weather brings meatier, more substantial meals to the Greek Heritage Cooking kitchen table. For me and my family, it has always been about this traditional lentil soup, which is actually a vegan dish. It nourishes the body, but it also feeds the soul. Breathing in a hot spoonful of fakies (the Greek word for lentils) also invokes memories of a childhood in Sparta, Greece, my mother, Demetra, preparing this soup for our dinner. I would watch what I thought was the most remarkable thing, as she used a sharp paring knife to cut deep into a whole onion, nestling a couple of bay leaves into the cuts and then placing the entire thing into the lentils. It was her way of adding flavor to the soup and then having ease of removal of the onion and bay leaves just before serving. Dressing the soup as she served it, turned my mother into an otherworldly handler of magic. At serving time, she would drizzle a generous amount of olive oil, add just a dash or two of red wine vinegar and delicately set three Kalamata olives into each bowl. How can a child not be enchanted by such prowess in the kitchen! It was all magical. This soup comforted me and my family during our immigrant years in Australia, and then in America for almost thirty years as I've prepared it for my husband and step-children and ladled it into big bowls for friends recovering from a cold. When it's time to put on warmer garments and sit by a fire, that's the best time to bring out the lentils and make this magic soup. During the uncertain times that we are living in this year, my Greek lentil soup is filled with comfort, with love, with nourishment and with hopeful reassurance. It can heal the world."

TRADITIONAL GREEK LENTIL SOUP

INGREDIENTS

- 2/3 cup olive oil
- 1 medium-large yellow onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled, mashed and chopped
- 1 (1lb) bag brown lentils (2 ¼ cups) rinsed in a colander to remove surface dirt
- 2-3 large bay leaves
- 28 ounces of diced tomatoes with juice or the equivalent of fresh, peeled and cored tomatoes
- 2 teaspoons fine sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 6 cups of water plus more as needed

METHOD

1. Heat olive oil in a large, heavy pot and stir in the onion and salt. Continue to cook gently until the onions have softened, stirring as needed.
2. Add the garlic, bay leaves, pepper and lentils. Stir to coat lentils with seasonings and oil, then add the tomatoes and water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low and cover the pot.
3. Keep an eye on the liquid, adding 1 cup of water as needed. Sometimes lentils can

soak up water very rapidly. The soup should be thick, but still soupy.

4. Cook until lentils are tender (about 1 hour). Some of the lentils will break down and add a creamy component to the soup, and the remainder will be soft but still intact. This happens magically in the pot. You have to be patient to allow the creaminess to happen. There should not be any crunch - all tender to the tooth.

5. Ladle into bowls and top with the traditional garnish.

Traditional Garnish (optional)

Top each bowl of soup with one teaspoon of red wine vinegar, two tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil and three Kalamata olives. This is not a dressing to be shaken, and the quantities serve only as a guide. Drizzle the vinegar and olive oil directly onto the soup and finish with the whole olives.

Traditional Accompaniments (not optional)

Good Feta cheese (which is served on the side like a pickle and not crumbled into the soup) and a really good, oven-fresh piece of French bread are necessary. Make it a thick piece of bread. A large bite of the bread and a tiny bite of cheese should precede every other spoonful of soup. This may require another big piece of bread. Trust me, you won't regret the extra bread. Remember, this is about comfort, not denial.

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Despina is a cooking coach and writer. She has a happy habit of blogging recipes and foodrelated ideas at www.AlphaGoodCookCooking.blogspot.com. Her current passion is researching and testing recipes for her book, "Greek Heritage Cooking Simplified," dedicated to keeping alive her family's recipes for her nieces. Born in Greece, Despina grew up in Sydney, Australia. She lives with her husband, Dewey, in a small town by a lake in the South of the United States of America. Her three stepchildren can't wait for the book to be published so they can recreate their favorites of the Greek food that they grew up with. Her favorite recipes are her mother's Yemista (stuffed roasted vegetables) and her Aunt Polly's Roasted Lamb Shoulder with Fresh Artichokes and Potatoes.