

BREATHING ROOM: WHAT ARE YOU COOKING?

[NB: check the byline, thanks. /~Rayne]

It's been quite a while since I posted an open thread around an open question, like what are you reading, or what are you streaming or podcasting.

This time I want to ask what are you cooking, since even more of us cook than read and/or stream – even if cooking for some of us is nothing more than preparing a Cup-O-Noodles.

The topic occurred to me as I wandered the internet looking for recipes for a Lenten meatless Friday supper. I'm a long-lapsed Catholic but I still observe Lent this way.

My youngest who vacillates between agnosticism and atheism, asked me once why I still gave up some non-essentials and/or observed meatless Fridays. I told them it was one way in which I recognized my privilege – I can choose to forgo something when many people have no choice but to go without.

It's also one of the ways I can consciously reduce my carbon footprint, recognizing not only the privilege of conspicuous consumption and its burden on climate, but actively practice a habit on which I should and will expand.

Meat production is carbon intensive, there's just no way around it. If I want to be more aggressive about reducing my CO₂ production, reducing meat in my diet is a big step in the right direction.

Animal protein is also not good for one's health. I really don't want to take my spouse to the ER again for another euphemistic "cardiac event," thank you.

Nor do I want to be the reason why children are

injured or killed in the work place in states like Arkansas where child labor has once again become acceptable. (Thanks, Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, for that new spin on “chicken fingers.”)

Yet I admit I’m an omnivore. I can’t see myself ever completely giving up a juicy rare steak, crispy bacon, or plump and tender poultry though I’ll eat less of them. I’ll be in line when lab-grown meat finally becomes commercially viable as a replacement for our current meat production. It hasn’t yet arrived and may not for some time.

But I can cut back on the number of meals based on meat and I can stretch what meat I use. This past week because of Lent I focused on a meatless Friday meal.

I’ve got lots of different whole grains in my pantry and a mess of canned tomatoes. When I ran across this recipe for a North African barley-tomato soup, I ran with it.

Holy wah! It’s easy and tasty even with a few tweaks – even faster with an Instant Pot pressure cooker.

I found the recipe in The New York Times (I swear Cooking is the Grey Lady’s only reliable section):

<https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1024017-tchicha-barley-and-tomato-soup>

But there are other very similar versions elsewhere:

Tomato Barley Soup – a simple version more soup than stew
<https://www.cookwithcampbells.ca/recipe/tomato-and-barley-soup/>

Barley Tomato Soup – a variation from a kosher website
<https://www.kosher.com/recipe/barley-tomato-soup-11012>

Vegetable Barley Soup – less emphasis on

tomatoes, more veggies and some curry
<https://www.indianhealthyrecipes.com/barley-soup/>

Hssoua Belboula Hamra – another version of North African barley tomato soup, this time from Morocco
<https://tasteofmaroc.com/moroccan-cracked-barley-soup-tomatoes/>

All of these are pretty easy to make straight from the recipes. The Campbell's version does have one problem: it calls for two cans of tomatoes but doesn't specify the size. Based on the NYT-Cooking version, I'd recommend two 14.5-oz cans or one 28-oz can.

This soup is also forgiving if you have make little adjustments. I didn't have sweet paprika on hand; I substituted smoked paprika instead and added a couple healthy shakes of ground cayenne. It was delicious. Nor did I use the amount of salt the recipe called for, choosing to taste it first before adding any more salt. Still turned out great.

But I also split up the cooking between two Instant Pots – yes, I know, I'm kind of ridiculous about Instant Pots, using them 4-5 times a week and often two at a time. I divided the vegetable stock between the barley and the tomato base, using three cups of the stock in which to cook the barley, and the rest with the remaining ingredients.

In the first pot I put the 1-1/4 cups pearl barley with 3 cups vegetable stock, a tablespoon of olive oil to prevent foaming which can clog the pressure vent, and a minced clove of garlic. I cooked it on high pressure for 20 minutes and let the pot naturally depressurize.

In the second pot (you can simply put the cooked barley aside in a bowl and use the same Instant Pot), I placed all the other ingredients with the remaining two cups vegetable stock. I cooked this on high for five minutes then let the pot depressurize.

When the tomato-broth base is done, I mixed in the cooked barley and stirred well. After tasting I adjusted the salt, added a little cracked black pepper, a smattering of fresh thyme leaves from my winter kitchen garden, and served with grated Parmesan cheese as a garnish.

The NYT-Cooking recipe says it serves 4-6 and believe me, it's more like 6-8. It's very filling.

The pearl barley will thicken the soup as it cools; after refrigeration it will be much more stew-like if you serve it the next day. Thin with tomato juice or vegetable broth when reheating if you like it more soup-y.

Some cultures eat soup for breakfast. This one would be great with a poached egg on top, like a variation on shakshuka.

If you try this but want more non-meat protein, try cooking along with the barley a gluten-free cooked grain like rice, corn, beans, peas, or lentils which assures a full complement of amino acids. If you're not allergic to soy you could add some TVP or tempeh chunks.

Next time I need a meatless meal I'm going to try a mushroom-barley variation since barley was so good and easy, and I've got both dried and frozen mushrooms to use up.

What about you? What are you cooking? If you're cooking less meat, what's on the menu?

This is an open thread.