

LAMORINDA WEEKLY

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Soup's On!

By Susie Iventosch

For most of January, I questioned whether or not we'd ever be reunited with that glowing red ball in the sky known as the sun, but from the weather this week, it looks like we have! Still, the cold winter days lend themselves nicely to steaming hot dinners. So to warm the inner core of our winter-weary bodies I say, "Bring on the soup!" Here are three soup recipes that are easy to make,

and lend themselves to your own creative additions.

In December, my friend Elaine McDonald treated my daughter and me to dinner at La Piazza in Orinda. It was plenty cold back then, too, and luck would have it that La Piazza featured artichoke soup as the soup du jour. I adore artichokes – they've constituted many a lunch for me over the years, but I'd never had the pleasure of dining on artichoke

soup. This soup was very light and smooth – more like bisque, and the flavor was delicate and delicious. La Piazza owner Charles Mounzer was kind enough to share his recipe, which is featured below. Two additional soup recipes for artichoke-tomato soup with bleu cheese and chicken corn chowder are both quick and easy and make a great dinner on a cold winter's night.



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La Piazza Artichoke Soup

Charles Mounzer, owner of La Piazza in Orinda, says this is their most popular soup, and it all came about quite by accident.

"We were making some changes to our menu several years ago, and decided to offer pizza with artichokes," Mounzer remembered. "We ordered in two cases of artichoke bottoms, but we forgot to put the dish on the menu."

Not wanting to waste the large quantity of artichokes, they decided to try an artichoke soup, which has since become one of La Piazza's signature dishes.

"It was a great mistake," Mounzer added. "Everyone loves it!"

RECIPE

La Piazza Artichoke Soup

- 2 cans artichoke bottoms
- ½ cup half & half
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2-3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large russet potato, peeled and diced
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup chicken broth
(or vegetable broth for vegetarians)
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a large soup pot, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add onions and cook over medium-high heat until caramelized. Add the rest of the ingredients to the pot, bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to low, cooking for about 30 minutes, or until all veggies are soft. With a hand-held electric mixer, beat until smooth. If you prefer to use a food processor, that's fine, but kind of messy with all the liquid. Heat to serve.

Artichoke Heart-Tomato Soup with Bleu Cheese

(Serves six)

- 1-2 tablespoons butter
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- ½ cup cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 2 8-ounce boxes of frozen artichoke hearts
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 3 cups chicken broth
- ½ cup half & half or heavy cream
- 1/3 cup crumbled blue cheese
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, minced
- Salt and white pepper to taste

In soup pot, heat butter until bubbly, add onion and sauté over medium-high heat until soft. Add tomatoes and continue to cook for two to three minutes until tomatoes begin to soften. Add artichoke hearts, wine and chicken broth. Cover and heat until artichokes are soft. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature. With a food processor fitted with a metal blade, puree soup to a smooth consistency. Return to pot and add half & half, thyme and bleu cheese. Cook over medium heat until hot. Season to taste with salt and pepper before serving.



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Chicken Corn Chowder

(Serves six)

- 1 yellow onion, diced
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 2-3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 potatoes, peeled or not, your choice, and diced into quarter-inch cubes
- 1 16-ounce bag frozen yellow corn
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and finely diced (I used canned jalapeno)
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro, chopped
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 3-4 cups chicken broth (depending upon how thick or thin you like the soup)
- ½ cup half & half
- ¼ cup dry white wine or dry sherry

Louisiana Hot Sauce for serving (if the jalapenos aren't hot enough for you!)

In a large soup pot, heat 2-3 tablespoons oil, add onion, and sauté until translucent. Add chicken to pan and cook over medium-high heat until slightly browned, about five minutes. Cover and cook for another five minutes over low heat until chicken is barely cooked. Remove onion and chicken from pan and set aside. In the same pan, add another tablespoon of oil and potatoes. Cook over medium heat until potatoes are slightly browned. Add corn and continue to cook for about five minutes, stirring frequently. Return chicken and onion to pan along with fresh thyme, white pepper, jalapeno and cilantro. Add 3-4 cups chicken broth, white wine, and ½ cup half and half. Simmer for about five to ten minutes until hot. Soup can be prepared to this point until ready to use. When ready to serve, reheat over medium heat, but don't allow soup to boil. Serve piping hot.

