

Consider the Homeless

Red Lentil Dal

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This is the recipe I use to make lentil dal for Consider the Homeless (CTH), a volunteer group that serves hot soup to 100 of our un-housed neighbors every Thursday and Sunday, rain or shine. They do much more, distributing food packages twice a week and tents, sleeping bags, and other essentials when possible. Thick, nutritious lentil dal is great to make in large batches – it shares and freezes well – but if nine gallons is more than you bargained for, I've included a recipe for a smaller batch below.

Makes 9 gallons

1 ¼ cup cooking oil

6-7 large yellow onions, diced

salt

4 tablespoon cumin seeds

3 tablespoon coriander seeds

2 tablespoon fennel seeds

2 tablespoon black peppercorns

8 each cloves

4 tablespoon ground turmeric

3 tablespoons mild chili powder or paprika

13 pounds red lentils

6 gallons water

1/3 cup red wine vinegar (or white wine vinegar or cider vinegar)

Heat a large soup pot to high, add the oil and immediately the onions. Add 1 tablespoon salt and stir. Lower the heat to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, until very soft, about 20 minutes. If the onions start to brown before they are done, add a cup or so of water to get them steamy.

Meanwhile, heat a large skillet to medium and add the cumin, coriander, fennel, black peppercorns, and cloves. Toast, shaking the skillet occasionally, until fragrant and wiggling, about a minute. Don't burn the spices – if they start smoking, get them out of there! Finely grind the toasted spices (I use my coffee grinder for grinding amounts of spices too large for mortar and pestle. To clean it before and after, I grind a couple tablespoons of raw rice).

Add the ground, toasted spices, the turmeric, and the chili to the onions when they're done. Cook, stirring, for 10 seconds or so, then add the lentils, water, and 5 tablespoons salt. Raise the heat to high and bring to a boil, stirring often to avoid sticking. Lower the heat so the dal just simmers and cook, stirring semi-obsessively, until the lentils are very soft and falling apart, 45 minutes to an hour. Stir in the vinegar. Sometimes I use a big whisk or a stick-blender to make the dal smoother. Taste and adjust for constituency (more water if too thick), salt, acidity.

Brown, yellow or red lentil dal

These lentils are soup magic. Neither the magic that makes a beanstalk to the clouds nor the magical fruit of song, theirs is a magic of transformation: now discreet lentil entities, now a unified soup. This soup, Indian dal, is always delicious, sometimes auspicious, and good to eat every day.

Makes 8 servings

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 medium yellow onion, diced

Salt

1 tablespoon cumin, crushed whole seeds

1 tablespoon coriander, crushed whole seeds

1 teaspoon fennel, crushed whole seeds

½ teaspoon crushed hot red pepper

1 tablespoon ground turmeric

2 cups lentils, rinsed

4 cups water

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar (or white wine vinegar or cider vinegar)

Heat a soup pot and add the olive oil and then the onions and a teaspoon of salt. Stir, lower the heat, and cover the pot with a lid. Check and stir after a few minutes, letting the lid drip back into the pot to keep things steamy. Lower the heat if there is any browning going on, and recover. Cook like this until the onions are tender, about 15 minutes. Add the cumin, coriander, fennel and hot red pepper and cook, stirring, for a minute to toast the spices. Add the turmeric and stir for a half minute more. Add the lentils, water, and the vinegar, bring to a boil, lower to a simmer and cook until the lentils give up their earthly bodies and become one with your dinner, stirring occasionally. Add more water if getting too thick. If you want the dal to be smoother, you can just stir the heck out of it, pass it through a food mill, or even spin it in the blender, though I usually find these steps unnecessary. Often, a “sizzle” of butter or oil with garlic and more of the spices is made and spooned over the bowls of dal. To make a sizzle, simply heat a small pan, add oil or butter and when it is hot, some minced garlic and more of the spices you used in the soup. Let it sizzle for half a minute till it smells really good, and then spoon it over the dal. Dried mint, like for tea, is also nice in a sizzle.

Plain yogurt and chopped fresh mint or cilantro is very good on dal.