

Black Bean Soup with Masa, Mint, and Queso Fresco Dumplings
Sopa de Frijol Negro con Chochoyotes, Menta, y Queso Fresco

¼ cup canola or safflower oil
½ cup chopped white onion
1 garlic clove
2 chiles de árbol, stemmed and coarsely chopped (seeded if desired)
8 ounces ripe tomatoes (about 2 medium), cored and chopped
Kosher or sea salt
3 cups Basic Black Beans with ½ cup of their cooking broth
8 cups chicken or vegetable broth, homemade or store-bought
1 cup corn masa flour, such as Maseca (preferably masa mix for tamales, but masa for tortillas will also work)
¾ cup water
4 ounces queso fresco, farmer's cheese, or ricotta, crumbled (about ½ cup loosely packed)
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint
Mexican crema, for garnish (optional)

1. Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large heavy pot or casserole over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook for 5 to 6 minutes, until it has completely softened, the edges are golden brown, and there is a toasted, sweet aroma wafting from the pot. Add the garlic and chiles and cook, stirring, for 1 minute, or until the garlic is fragrant and has colored and the chiles have softened a bit and intensified to a darker and more burnt red. Stir in the tomatoes and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring, for 5 minutes, or until the tomatoes have cooked down to a soft, thick paste.
2. Add the beans with their broth and 4 cups of the chicken or vegetable broth. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium, cover partially, and simmer for about 10 minutes. The beans should be completely soft and the broth thick and soupy.
3. Meanwhile, prepare the masa for the dumplings: In a medium bowl, combine the corn masa flour with the water and ¼ teaspoon salt. Knead together with your hands. The dough will be very coarse and seem dry. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons oil, the cheese, and mint and mix together until the dough is very soft and homogenous, about 1 minute.
4. Working in batches, puree the soup in a blender until completely smooth. Cover the blender lid with a towel to avoid splashes. Pour back into the pot and stir in the remaining 4 cups broth. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, then reduce the heat to low.
5. To form the dumplings: For each one, scoop up enough masa to make a 1-inch ball, roll it between your hands (moisten your hands if the dough sticks), and gently drop into the soup. Once all the masa balls have been shaped and added to the soup, partially cover the pot and let the soup simmer gently for about 20 minutes, until the dumplings are cooked through. They will thicken the soup as they simmer. Taste the soup for salt and add more if necessary.
6. Serve hot, garnishing each bowl with a spoonful of crema, if desired.

Variation: This soup will be much more delicious if you use home-cooked black beans, but if you are in a time crunch, feel free to use canned. Two 15-ounce cans plus an extra ½ cup chicken or vegetable broth or water can stand in for homemade.

Mexican Today: Pati Jinich cookbook