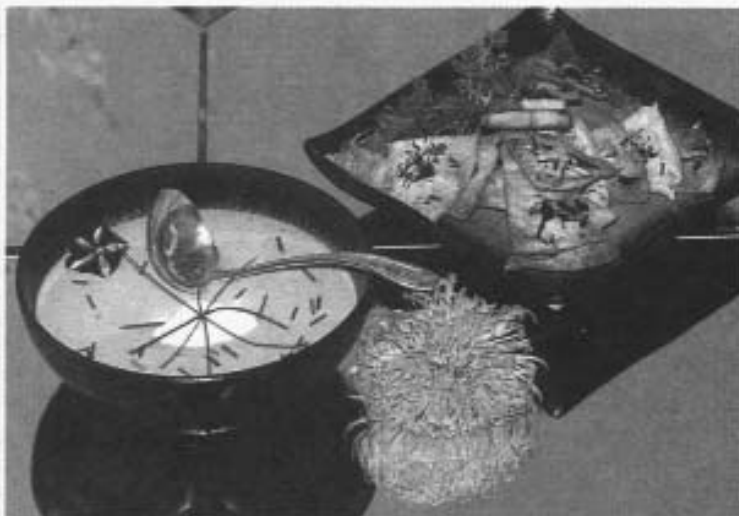


Food

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New twists on a cold standby



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DARBY CLEM

Sweet potato vichyssoise is one of Marjorie Druker's offerings at New England Soup Factory in Brookline and Newton.

By Jean Kressy
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Potage bonne femme, the leek and potato soup made by every French housewife, was a culinary nobody until Louis Diat got hold of it. Diat, chef at the beginning of this century at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in New York, took his mother's recipe — leeks, potato, and water — served it ice cold with a few chives sprinkled on top, and — voila! — vichyssoise.

Diat must have known that it would take more than a bowl of potato soup to impress his clientele. Whatever vichyssoise lacked in originality was more than made up for in presentation. Waiters wearing tuxedos and white gloves carried the soup to the dining room in silver tureens. With great flourish, they lifted the covers so everyone could admire the soup, set in a bed of crushed ice.

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"Leek and potato soup smells good, tastes good, and is simplicity itself to make," wrote Julia Child in "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" (Knopf, 1968), the cookbook that introduced millions of Americans to French cuisine. Child's recipe, which she admits is an American version of the original, is made with chicken broth and enriched with cream.

Like many recipes that lend themselves to variation, vichyssoise has been tinkered with over the years. Since it was first served in 1917, Diat's leek and potato soup has been made with other vegetables, including watercress and spinach. The water has been replaced by broth, and everything from cream to coconut milk has been added. Even the texture has changed. What was once smooth and velvety can now be a coarse puree. The only constants: Vichyssoise is always made with potatoes, and it is always served cold.

The secret to a good vichyssoise, says Marjorie Druker, is the potatoes. Druker, chef and co-owner of New England Soup Factory in Brookline and Newton, swears by Yukon gold potatoes.

"They have the right amount of starch, and their tint of yellow gives the soup a pretty color," she says. Another soup-making tip that Druker willingly shares is how to cook potatoes. "Sweat them," she says. "It opens their pores and releases their flavors." To sweat the vegetables, cook them over low heat, turning them occasionally with a large spoon, until they lose their raw look and are lightly glazed but not browned.

Depending on how smooth you like your soup, you can puree it in either a blender or a processor. A processor takes less time, but the results will not be as smooth. To prevent soup or other hot food from exploding out of the blender while pureeing, Druker's advice is to remove the insert on the blender top and cover the opening with a kitchen towel or an inverted cup before you turn on the machine.

Always check the consistency and taste of the soup before you serve it. As soup chills, it thickens, and the flavor may not be as pronounced. To thin it, whisk in a little water. Taste a spoonful and adjust the seasoning. A good vichyssoise, says Druker, should be "clean, pure, and natural."

VICHYSOISE

This Americanized version of cold leek and potato soup is what most people expect when they order vichyssoise. If you have space in the refrigerator, chill the bowls before you serve the soup. For a perfectly smooth soup, puree in a blender. For a somewhat coarser texture, use a food processor.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2½ cups thinly sliced leeks (white parts only)
- 3 cups peeled, diced potatoes (1 pound)
- 5 cups chicken stock or canned reduced-sodium chicken broth
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Snipped fresh chives, for garnish

In a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the leeks and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 6 minutes. Add the potatoes and reduce the heat to low. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the stock, salt, and pepper. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 25 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. Cool, uncovered, until it is cool enough to handle.

Transfer the soup in batches to a processor or blender and process until smooth. Whisk in the cream. Cool to lukewarm, then chill. Garnish with chives before serving.

Serves 6 to 8.

NEW ENGLAND SOUP FACTORY SWEET POTATO VICHYSOISE

This recipe has been adapted from Marjorie Druker, chef and co-owner of the New England Soup Factory in Brookline and Newton. She features more than 10 soups each day, and when the weather is hot, at least three of them are cold. Creme fraiche is thicker than our heavy cream and has a nutty, slightly tangy taste. It's sold in some supermarkets and specialty food stores. If you cannot find it, you can substitute sour cream. It will be tangier, but will taste fine.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 cups thinly sliced leeks
- ½ cup diced celery
- 4 cups diced, peeled sweet potatoes (1½ pounds)
- 5 cups chicken stock or canned reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- Kosher salt and white pepper to taste
- 1 cup light cream
- Creme fraiche or sour cream, for garnish
- Snipped fresh chives, for garnish

In a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the leeks and celery, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the leeks are softened, about 7 minutes. Add the potatoes and reduce the heat to low. Cook for 6 minutes or until the potatoes are lightly glazed, stirring occasionally. Add the stock, cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 25 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. Stir in the brown sugar, nutmeg, salt, and pepper. Cool, uncovered, until it is cool enough to handle.

Puree in a blender. Whisk in the cream. Cool to lukewarm, then chill. Garnish with creme fraiche or sour cream and chives before serving.

Serves 6 to 8.

GREEN BEAN VICHYSOISE

Nubby bits of beans give the soup a slightly coarse texture, and tiny flecks of bright green parsley give it a fresh look. Depending on whether the soup is served in cups or bowls, the recipe will serve 6 to 8.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2½ cups thinly sliced leeks
- 3 cups diced, peeled potatoes (1 pound)
- 5 cups vegetable broth, made with 5 teaspoons powdered broth and 5 cups water
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 pound green beans, trimmed and cut in half (about 4 cups)
- 1 cup lightly packed fresh parsley leaves
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Snipped fresh chives, for garnish

In a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the leeks and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 6 minutes. Add the potatoes and reduce the heat to low. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the broth, salt, and pepper. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the beans, cover, and simmer an additional 10 to 15 minutes or until the vegetables are tender. Cool, uncovered, until it is cool enough to handle.

Transfer the soup in batches to a food processor, add the parsley, and puree. Whisk in the cream. Cool to lukewarm, then chill. Garnish with the chives before serving.

Serves 6 to 8.

CARROT VICHYSOISE WITH COCONUT MILK

Coconut milk is hardly an ingredient in classic French cuisine, but when you are creating a version of vichyssoise with carrots, ginger, and cilantro, it adds flavor and a velvety texture.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1½ cups thinly sliced leeks, white and light green parts
- 1 cup diced celery with leaves
- 3 cups thinly sliced carrots (about 1 pound)
- 3 cups diced, peeled potatoes (1 pound)
- 5 cups vegetable broth, made with 5 teaspoons powdered broth and 5 cups water
- 1 cup water
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 cup canned light coconut milk

In a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the leeks and celery, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the leeks are softened, about 6 minutes. Add the carrots and potatoes, cover, and reduce the heat to very low. Cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the broth, water, salt, and pepper. Cover and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat, and simmer for 25 minutes or until the vegetables are tender. Cool, uncovered, until cool enough to handle.

Transfer the soup in batches to a food processor. Add the cilantro and ginger, and puree. Stir in the coconut milk. Cool to lukewarm, then chill.

Serves 8.

ROASTED BEET VICHYSOISE WITH SWEET ONIONS AND SOUR CREAM

- 3 large beets (about 2½-inch diameter) with short stems
- 1 to 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 cups diced Vidalia or Spanish onion
- 3 cups diced, peeled potatoes (1 pound)
- 6 cups water
- 2 teaspoons instant beef bouillon
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ½ cup reduced-fat sour cream plus extra for garnish
- Snipped fresh dill, for garnish

Set the oven to 425 degrees. Scrub the beets and rub them with the olive oil until they are lightly coated. Place them in a shallow baking pan or pie plate and bake for 1 hour or until they are tender.

Meanwhile, in a Dutch oven or large pot over medium-high heat, melt the butter. Add the onion and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir occasionally. Add the potatoes, reduce the heat to low, and cook for 5 minutes. Stir occasionally. Add the water, bouillon, salt, and pepper. Cover and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 20 minutes or until the potatoes are tender.

When the beets are tender, peel and dice them. Add them to the soup, cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Uncover and let cool. When cool enough to handle, puree in batches in a processor. Whisk in the ½ cup of sour cream and chill.

Garnish with dollops of sour cream and the dill before serving.

Serves 6 to 8.