Stock Up on Stocks

In this chilly - for Florida! - weather, you might be thinking about pots of nice hot soup, or thick chunky stews to keep you warm inside. Yes, you could open a can of soup, and get a week's worth of sodium in one can. Not such a good idea after all, is it? There is a widening variety of dried soups on the shelves too. Add the powder to the water, heat to a boil, and you have a pan of soup. But those powders are just as high in salt as the cans are. That was a disappointment when I read those labels. Some of the flavors were so tempting, curries and Spanish bean soups - yum!

But I value my health enough that they're off limits - unless I make some major changes. So, I could buy a package of the dried bean soup. But when I heat the water for the package, I would also open a can of white beans. I'll drain and rinse the beans, unless they were canned with reduced or no salt. And, I will either thaw a package of frozen spinach or collards, or wash and slice a bag of fresh greens. Then, once the dry mix is in the water and simmering nicely, I'll add the canned beans. When they're hot I'll stir in the greens and simmer them just until they're wilted and warm. To serve it I'll ladle it out and top eat bowl with just a teaspoon of olive oil for better flavor.

I didn't really take any of the salt away. But I've stretched the flavors of the mix from 2 servings (what the package said) to at least 4 or 6. That means each serving has less than half the original amount. Now I can realistically include it in my menu, enjoy the flavors, and not have to keep 20 different spices on my shelf.

But if I'm feeling particularly enthusiastic about making soup, I can start from scratch! That way I'll get all the freshest flavors, and I can control completely how much salt I add. Until - I look at the label on the can of broth. Whoops! There's a lot of sodium in most of them. The ones without salt just don't have much flavor. And if I make my soup with plain water and no salt, it's so bland. Is there hope?

Yes, of course there is. But I need to start several days, or weeks, ahead. Don't worry, it's not hard! I can start by making my own stock or broth base. All it takes is boiling the ends of my
vegetables, or meat bones, to extract and concentrate their flavors. Then I can use that as the base for a quick soup or stew later.

The process is easy. As I chop and dice and peel veggies throughout the week, I won't dump them in the garbage disposal. I'll drop them into a zipper-seal bag or freezer container. After each meal I stick the bag in the freezer. Things like carrot tops, celery leaves and bases, onion skins and ends, tomato cores, mushroom stems and spinach stems are all great additions. I will sometimes keep a separate bag for broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage or Brussels sprout leaves. These all have a pretty strong flavor and can overpower the other flavors. But if I want to make a cream of broccoli soup, they're perfect.

When I have enough veggies, or I have a good blend of veggies, I make stock. It's as simple as covering them with water in a large kettle, getting it boiling, then simmering them for 20 minutes to as long as an hour. The longer they simmer the more flavor is extracted. Then I strain out the pieces and save the juice! If you want to press out more juice the stock will be cloudier, but it'll taste fine.

This stock can be used right away, or frozen for later. If I freeze it, it's in small containers of just enough for one batch of soup for me. That way I don't have to thaw too much to use. I'll add herbs and seasonings, and salt if I think it really needs it, after I thaw it, because some herbs change flavor when they're frozen. But still, I'll have a great flavor base for whatever soup or stew I'm in the mood for. Here's a very quick and very tasty soup that's also lower in fat than most. Enjoy!

Quick and Light Cream of Broccoli Soup

2 cups stock or broth 1/3 cup non-fat dried milk powder
3 Tbsp cornstarch 1 Tbsp chopped onion
¼ tsp each salt, basil, thyme, pepper 1 10-oz pkg frozen broccoli, thawed
1 ½ cups skim milk ½ cup shredded low fat Cheddar cheese
1 Tbsp butter-flavor granules optional

Drain and chop broccoli. In saucepan combine dry milk and cornstarch and mix until smooth. Gradually stir in the stock or broth, stirring until smooth. Add seasonings, bring to boil stirring constantly. Boil 1 minute. Add broccoli, milk, cheese (and granules if using). Heat but don't boil until cheese melts and soup is hot, stirring occasionally. Ladle into bowls, garnish with another pinch of shredded cheese if desired. Serves 4.