

Silky Seasonal Cauliflower Soup

To make your silky seasonal cauliflower soup with zingy za'atar, we're gonna tackle the chopping first. You can do this in whichever way you can, cos as you can see from the picture, it's a blended soup, so this does not need to be your best chopping. Chop an onion, chop a couple of cloves of garlic. Approach your cauliflower and cut it in half, then cut out and slice that core and before chopping it into little pieces, keeping the florets to one side for later. Get your half a celeriac – if it's really big, cut it into quarters - carefully peel it with a knife, then you cut it into sheets of celeriac, about 2 centimetres thick. Then pile them up into 2 piles, and cut into batons, also about 2 centimetres – so, 2b2, or is that inches? – that's a builder's quote there. Anyway, cut it into 2b2 centimetres, and then you chop it down into little pieces – doesn't need to be beautiful, remember that!

Right, so you've now got a little pile of chopped onion, you've got a pile of chopped garlic, you've got a pile of chopped cauliflower core, you've got the florets to one side for later, and you've got some beautiful celeriac. You get a pan on, nice and wide – it doesn't need to be high but it does need to be wide, and you put into that a good slosh of olive oil (about a tablespoon and a half) and you wait until that's hot – not boiling hot, not super, super, smoky hot, but just good and hot – hot enough that when you put the onion and garlic in, they sizzle. And that's what you want: sizzle. But you don't want anything to brown because we're heading for a nice, white, virgin, pure as the driven snow soup here.

This is a very nice soup, this. I first had za'atar and cauliflower in Beirut about a decade ago, when we could travel, remember that? It was very, very yummy and it stayed in my consciousness since. That was a roasted cauliflower but this is just twisting on that to make it into a yummy soup.

Anyway, so you've got your onions and your garlic, which have now softened, after that small trip to Beirut, in our minds, and now you're going to put in the celeriac and the middle of the cauliflower and give it a good old stir. The heat's quite nice and hot now: keep stirring it, keep stirring – I'm stirring vigorously as I'm talking – and then you go back to your chopping board for your 2 sticks of celery. You slice them length-ways down the middle so you've got 4 thin sticks of celery. Chop those up and throw them in the pan as well. So, all that is sweating. You keep it turning over. Pretty high heat now, medium to high, and just keep turning it over. You want that veg to start softening, and keep softening, and keep softening as you're stirring and you're stirring. Meanwhile – just cos it's always good to be multitasking in a kitchen – you pick your thyme and throw that tablespoon of thyme leaves in there. And then, once you can see that it's really begun to soften round the edges, you can pour in the oat milk or the almond milk, and also stir in the veg bouillon and pop a lid on and bring it up to a simmer. Now, be careful, cos it'll make a mess if it spills over, which I did. That was my first mess of this soup. I had a spectacular one later on that I'll tell you in a second.

So, when it comes up to a simmer, you want to take the lid off, chuck in a little bit of salt, and just let it slowly tick-tick over. It won't take long now. Assuming you've given it a good 10 minutes on the sauté stage, it won't take more than about 10 minutes on the boiling. Oh, I forgot to put the cauliflower in – the cauliflower goes in before the oat milk, the florets. Can you manage that? Yeah! But it doesn't matter if you put it in with the florets but basically you want them to cook very little – they won't take more than about 5 minutes – 10 minutes maximum – to soften completely, which is what you need them to do.

So, everything's in there now, apart from the bits that are the finishers. You let that just tick-tick over, and then when you put a knife into the cauliflower florets and they are soft, you turn it off. You then blend them into 3 to 4 stages – 3 to 4 batches – that fourth batch is exactly where I redecorated my kitchen; not quite sure what happened but I had cauliflower soup everywhere. I just want to add at this stage, if it looks a bit scrambled egg, or, anyone who's ever had a baby out there, regurgitated baby vom, don't worry, it'll all come together in the blender and be silky and smooth, as promised in the title. So, don't worry if it looks a bit scrambled and "splitty" at the moment.

Then you've blended it, it all looks lovely. Tip it into your bowl, give it a good season, sprinkle on the za'atar, good old slosh of extra virgin to finish, and if you *must* put pepper in – which I'd really rather you didn't for this one – you'd better make it white, because it's a very beautiful soup, all white and driven like that. Okay, that's it: that is your vegan soup for February. It's a cauliflower soup with slightly Beirut inclinations, finished with za'atar and some very delicious extra virgin – both courtesy of my great friends: the ladies who run Zaytoon, a fantastic company bringing in Fairtrade products made by the wonderful women's cooperatives in Palestine. That's it from me – see ya next week!