

Tex-Mex Vegan Chili

By Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff

This is my friend Jim Sugarek's vegan interpretation of his mom's Tex-Mex chili recipe. The omission of meat makes this dish veg-friendly. And the addition of tofu and more vegetables gives it a colorful and nutritional boost. Served with rice and/or tortilla this is a substantial meal.

One of the major ingredients in this dish is tofu. Tofu is a very nourishing soybean food product. Its nutritional profile is superb! Tofu is rich in protein, iron and calcium -- all of these are important nutrients to maintain good health. And, unlike some more difficult to break down proteins such as beans, tofu is easy to digest. In addition, some research suggest that tofu is a safeguard against breast and prostate cancers. Tofu is a versatile food item due to its porous texture and bland flavor, so it can be incorporated into many foods and take on their flavors.

The vegetables going into this chili are also remarkably healthy. Celery support heart health and digestive functions. Zucchini are a great source of vitamins A and C; both support our immune system. Carrots are good for our vision health. Lastly, tomatoes are a good source of vitamin A, C, E and K; all helpful in fighting diseases. In addition, the phyto-nutrients in tomatoes protect us from damage done by an excessive sun-light exposure.

14 to 16 oz. firm tofu, crumbled after draining excess water out (to measure about 2 cups)

1 tablespoon olive oil or any cooking oil

3 medium size Roma tomatoes or 2 large tomatoes

12 to 14 oz canned tomatoes (crushed or diced)

Or, -- if not using fresh tomatoes

30 oz canned tomatoes (crushed or diced)

3 tablespoons of olive oil or any cooking oil

1 small or ½ big onion cut into very small pieces (feel free use food processor for this task)

2 cloves of garlic, minced

1 small or ½ large red or green bell pepper, cut into small pieces (to measure 1 cup)

2 to 3 stalks of celery sliced into strips and then cut into small pieces (to measure 1 cup)

2 small zucchinis

or 1 small zucchini and 1 small yellow (crook neck) summer squash (to measure 1½ cups)

1 carrot sliced and then cut into small cubes (to measure 1 cup)

1 teaspoon each (or as needed) cumin powder and Mexican oregano

2 teaspoon Mexican chili blend

¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)

1 to 2 teaspoon salt as needed

1 to 1½ tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons of all purpose flour (or gluten-free flour mix, use the finely ground variety)

Fresh cilantro leaves, chopped for garnish

Finely minced jalapeno pepper (as extra garnish for those who want a spicier chili)

First, allow the slab of tofu to rest, standing on a platter to drain some excess water. Next, crumble the tofu block into tiny pieces. Heat a tablespoon of oil in a heavy bottomed pan such as a cast iron skillet and add the crumbled tofu. Stir and cook for 6 to 8 minutes while scraping the pieces that stick to the bottom. When the tofu turns color and becomes somewhat dry, transfer to a platter, to prevent it from drying out too much. Set the tofu platter aside.

If using the mixture of fresh and canned tomatoes (which I prefer), boil the fresh tomatoes in a pot of water for a few minutes till their skins starts to split. Remove from boiling water and transfer the tomatoes in a bowl of cold water. Peel the tomatoes and chop them into small pieces collecting their juices, and place them in a sauce pot. Add the canned tomatoes along with its juices to the pot of fresh tomatoes. (If you are using all canned tomatoes, place them in a sauce pot along with its juices.) Cover and gently simmer the tomatoes for about 10 to 15 minutes.

While the tomatoes are cooking, heat the 3 tablespoon of oil in a large skillet or a wok and add the onions. Stir fry onions for two minutes and then add the garlic and cook them together for a minute. Next, add the bell pepper and sauté the mixture for two minutes. Then add celery, zucchini and carrots. Allow these vegetables to cook together for five minutes while stirring frequently. Then, transfer them onto a platter and set them aside.

Next, in a large sauce pot, combine the tomatoes and tofu. Cook together for 5 minutes stirring frequently and breaking any large lumps. Then add the stir-fried vegetables, the spices and a teaspoon of salt. Turn the heat down and allow the mixture to cook gently while attending to a final step of making a “roux” (cooking flour/oil together) to thicken the chili.

To make the “roux”: Heat 1tablespoon of oil in a very small pot, over a low/medium heat. Slowly sprinkle the white flour (or the gluten-free mixture) using one hand, while stirring the mixture carefully and constantly with the other hand using a wooden spoon. Add a bit more oil as needed to makes a smooth, light roux that does not have any lumps. This process should only take 1 to 2 minutes. Quickly, add this oil/flour mixture (roux) to the pot of chili and stir with a wooden spoon to mix it thoroughly. Now the mixture should have formed a nice thick pot of chili. Taste the chili to adjust seasoning by adding more salt and spices as needed.

Garnish with chopped fresh cilantro. Place additional cilantro and minced jalapeno on the table for those who want an extra flavor and heat. Serve with rice and/or warmed corn tortillas.

Makes 6 to 7 servings

Shanta is a Sunset District resident and the author of “Cooking Together” and “Flavors of India,” both available at Other Avenues Food Co-op., Green Apple Book Store, Rainbow Grocery Co-op, and at other local bookstores. Shanta writes recipes and articles on food. Shanta teaches cooking classes and does cooking demonstrations as well as lectures on food at public places such as the libraries. She shares her recipes via videos on YouTube. To view her cooking videos:

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