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# Lentils: Packed With Protein — and Flavor

By MARTHA ROSE SHULMAN

I must have been about 10 years old when I had lentil soup for the first time while visiting a friend's house. Ours was a meat-centric family, and I don't recall ever eating beans of any kind at home. That soup was a revelation.

I still love any type of lentil — green, brown or black — but I especially like the way green lentils hold their shape when cooked. They taste like other lentils, and they're really more brown than green after cooking. But the texture makes them wonderful, particularly in [salads](#).

Recently I bought a 1 1/2-pound bag of green French-style lentils (also known as Le Puy lentils), which has just been sitting on my pantry shelf. So this week I put together a couple of new lentil salads, one with tuna and one with a walnut oil dressing, and couldn't get enough of either one. And I heard not a word of protest from my son this week — not over the tuna salad, which we ate for days, nor over the lentil soups and stews we had for dinner for more than a week. Children still love lentils, apparently.

## Lentil and Escarole Soup

The combination of legumes and bitter greens like escarole is common in southern Italy. Escarole is a bitter lettuce that looks a little bit like frisée but with wider, tougher leaves. It's high in vitamin A and a good source of iron and potassium. This recipe is adapted from one in "Cucina Rustica," by Evan Kleiman and Viana La Place.

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 small onion, finely chopped

1 large or 2 small carrots, cut in small dice

3 to 4 garlic cloves, minced

1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 14-ounce can chopped [tomatoes](#), with juice; or 3/4 pound tomatoes, seeded and grated

1 cup lentils, washed and picked over

A bouquet garni made with a bay leaf, a few sprigs each thyme and parsley, and a Parmesan rind

6 cups water

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 small head escarole, washed and roughly chopped (about 6 cups)

*Optional:* 4 to 6 slices country bread, toasted and rubbed with a cut clove of garlic

**1.** Heat 1 tablespoon of the olive oil over medium heat in a large soup pot or Dutch oven. Add the onion and carrots. Cook, stirring often, until the onion is tender, about five minutes. Add the garlic and red pepper flakes. Cook, stirring, until the garlic is fragrant, 30 seconds to a minute. Stir in the tomatoes. Bring to a simmer, and cook, stirring, until the tomatoes have cooked down slightly and smell fragrant, five to 10 minutes. Add the lentils and simmer with the tomato mixture for a few minutes, then add the bouquet garni and the water. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and add salt to taste (1 to 2 teaspoons). Cover and simmer 30 minutes.

**2.** Add the escarole, and bring back to a simmer. Reduce the heat, cover and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until the escarole and the lentils are tender. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove the bouquet garni.

**3.** Toast slices of country bread if desired and rub with a cut clove of garlic. Place a slice in each bowl, ladle in the soup and serve.

**Yield:** Serves four to six.

**Advance preparation:** The soup will keep for three or four days in the refrigerator.

**Nutritional information per serving (four servings):** 289 [calories](#); 7 grams fat; 1 gram [saturated fat](#); 0 milligrams [cholesterol](#); 43 grams [carbohydrates](#); 10 grams [dietary fiber](#); 262 grams sodium; 17 grams protein

**Nutritional information per serving (six servings):** 193 calories; 5 grams fat; 1 gram saturated fat; 0 milligrams cholesterol; 29 grams carbohydrates; 7 grams dietary fiber; 175 milligrams sodium; 11 grams protein

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