

Nourishing Lamb Stew with Butternut Squash and Dang Gui

This nourishing and comforting lamb stew is perfect if you often tend to feel cold . The addition of warming and aromatic spices further enhances its healing qualities . The recipe was inspired by and adapted from a recipe by Nina Simonds in her book A Spoonful of Ginger. We've added herbs that are typical in Chinese medicinal soups; they are especially beneficial for women and people with circulation issues . Serve as-is or over steamed brown rice.

2 lbs	trimmed cubed lamb shoulder or lamb stewing cubes (1 1/2 inch/ 4 cm cubes)	1 kg
1 oz	dried dang gui (see tips, at left)	30 g
1	butternut squash (about 2 lbs/1 kg), peeled, seeded and cut into 1 1/2 inch (4 cm) cubes	1
1	bunch Swiss chard (12 oz/375 g), stemmed and cut into 2 inch (5 cm) wide ribbons	1
1/4 cup	tamari or soy sauce	60 mL
1/4 cup	rice wine, such as sake	60 mL
1 tbsp	coconut sugar or Demerara sugar	15 mL
	<i>Spice Mixture seeds removed</i>	
9	slices (quartersize) gingerroot, lightly crushed	
9	green onions, trimmed and cut into 1 inch (2 .5 cm) pieces, lightly crushed	
1 tbsp	coconut oil or avocado oil	15 mL
1 tsp	Sichuan peppercorns, shiny black	5 mL
3	cloves garlic, smashed and thinly sliced	
2	cinnamon sticks (2 inches/5 cm long each)	
2	whole star anise	

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

Tips

We like to use grass-fed lamb in this recipe. If you want a meatier dish, you can increase the amount to 3 lbs (1.5 kg). Heating the spices in oil builds a deep flavor base for the stew. We remove the Sichuan peppercorns after this step so that you don't end up biting into a nugget of numbing, spicy pepper in the finished dish.

Dang gui and Sichuan peppercorns are available online, and in Asian grocery stores, Chinese medicinal herb stores and specialty spice shops. Dang gui is usually sold dried and sliced.

1. Sauce Mixture: In a medium bowl, stir together 5 cups (1.25 L) water, tamari, wine and coconut sugar. Set aside.
2. Spice Mixture: In a Dutch oven, heat oil over medium heat. Add Sichuan peppercorns and cook, stirring, for 15 to 30 seconds or until grayish. Using a slotted soon, remove Sichuan peppercorns and discard. Add ginger, green onions, garlic, cinnamon sticks and star anise to pan and cook, stirring, for about 15 seconds or until fragrant.
3. Add lamb to spice mixture. Cook, turning often, for about 5 to 7 minutes or until browned on all sides.
4. Pour in sauce mixture and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and stir in dang gui. Partially cover and simmer, stirring every 30 minutes and skimming off any foam or fat that rises to the surface, for 2 hours or until lamb is fork-tender.
5. Stir in squash. Partially cover and cook, stirring occasionally and skimming off any foam or fat that raises to the surface, for 30 to 60 minutes or until squash is tender. Discard cinnamon sticks, ginger and star anise.
6. Stir in Swiss chard. Partially cover and cook for 5 minutes or until wilted and tender.
7. Spoon into serving bowls. Serve immediately.

VARIATION

Ellen discovered this vegan variation while teaching (vegetarian) students to cook with medicinal herbs. It is nourishing, aromatic and rich tasting. Substitute two 15 1/2-oz (439 g) cans chickpeas, drained and rinsed, for the lamb. Or cook them from scratch: soak

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) dried chickpeas in 5 cups (1.25 mL) water overnight or for up to 8 hours.

Drain and rinse well.

In a large saucepan, combine chickpeas, 4 cups (1 L) fresh water and 1 piece (1 inch/2.5 cm square) dried kombu. Bring to a boil.

Reduce heat to low and simmer for 1 1/2 hours or until tender.

Reserving cooking liquid, drain chickpeas well.

Use reserved cooking liquid in place of some of the water in Step 1.

To cook the stew, complete Steps 1 and 2.

Stir in chickpeas.

Reduce cooking time in Step 4 to 15 minutes.

Add squash in Step 5 and reduce cooking time to 20 to 30 minutes.

Health Tips

Lamb is a warming, bloodbuilding meat, and long cooking enhances these effects . In Chinese medicine, blood is considered a woman's essence, so this is a great dish for promoting female health . It is also excellent for anyone who habitually feels cold in the winter . However, if your body tends to run hot, it may be best to skip this stew .

The herb dang gui is used in Chinese herbal medicine to nourish, warm and enhance circulation, and is often administered to treat menstrual disorders . The herb is added to stews, soups, teas or tonic wines to support the yin and blood .

The ginger and dang gui in this stew echo the ingredients in a traditional Chinese medicinal lamb soup called *qian jin yao fang*, which was given to postpartum women experiencing cold in the abdomen .

The longer you cook this stew, the stronger its therapeutic value . The meat will also break down and be easier to digest and absorb .