

Red Kabocha Squash Soup

3½-pound red kabocha squash	6 cups chicken or vegetable stock
2 tablespoons vegetable oil	Handful of thyme sprigs
Kosher salt to taste	Handful of parsley sprigs
Black pepper to taste	6 sprigs fresh sage
3 leeks	2 bay leaves
2 carrots	10 peppercorns
2 large shallots	Freshly grated nutmeg to taste
1 medium onion	½ cup crème fraîche
3 cloves garlic	4 tablespoons unsalted butter
Scant tablespoon brown sugar	1 tablespoon minced chives

Preheat the oven to 350°. Line a baking pan with aluminum foil.

Cut the squash in half, and scrape out the seeds. Brush one of the squash halves with 2 teaspoons of the vegetable oil. Sprinkle the cavity with salt and pepper. Cut a cross in the flesh at the bottom of the squash half without cutting through the skin, and insert a sprig of the sage into the cross. Place the squash half cut side down on the baking sheet, and roast until very tender, about 1 hour.

Remove the squash from the oven, place it right side up, and allow it to cool. Scoop out the flesh, and set it aside.

Meanwhile, using either a sharp paring knife or vegetable peeler, peel the skin from the other half of the squash. Cut the flesh into 1/2-inch cubes.

Cut off and discard the dark-green part of the leeks. Cut off the root end. Cut a 1½-inch cross in the other end and rinse under cold water, spreading the layers apart to be certain you remove all the sand. Then thinly slice the cleaned leeks.

Thinly slice the carrots, the shallots, and the onion. Peel and crush the garlic cloves.

Put the remaining vegetable oil in a stock pot with the leeks, carrots, shallots, and onions, and cook over medium heat for several minutes, stirring frequently, until the vegetables are softened, but not browning.

Add the cubed raw squash, the garlic cloves, salt and pepper to taste, and cook gently for about 5 minutes, making certain the squash and garlic are not coloring.

Stir in the brown sugar, and continue cooking for another two minutes, stirring constantly.

In a sheet of washed cheesecloth, tie up the thyme sprigs, the parsley, remaining sage sprigs, bay leaves, and peppercorns, making a bouquet garni.

Add the chicken or vegetable stock and the bouquet garni to the stockpot with the other vegetables. Bring the contents to the simmer and cook for about 20 minutes or longer until the squash is very tender. Taste to be certain the squash is very soft.

Add the roasted squash and continue to simmer gently for about 30 minutes. Stir in the grated nutmeg, and taste for seasoning. Remove from the heat. Pull out the bouquet garni and squeeze out with tongs any absorbed liquid back into the stockpot. Discard the bouquet garni.

Transfer the soup in batches to a food processor or blender, and purée until smooth. Return the puréed soup to the pot. Reheat the soup until hot. If it is too thick, add more stock to it.

In the meantime, place a small skillet over medium-high heat. Add the butter, rotating the skillet and swirling the butter until it becomes hazelnut brown. Add the butter, including any brown bits on the bottom, to the soup, stirring quickly and averting your face because it will sputter.

Ladle the soup into bowls, topping each with a dollop of crème fraîche and a sprinkling of black pepper. Snip some chives over the crème fraîche, and serve.