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## Shiitake Barley Soup

Most farmers' markets have a mushroom vendor, and it's at ours that I've found the best mushrooms. My favorites are the tiered oyster mushrooms, which I simply fry up in butter, and shiitakes, whose meaty saltiness I find so nurturing. This is my take on classic mushroom barley soup, made better, I think, by the ginger and miso and a quick stock made of shiitake stems and leek tops that comes together as I prep the soup. I love the taste that the scraps bring to the broth, and it's nice to use every bit of both the mushrooms and the leeks. This soup is an ideal recipe if you're not feeling well, or when looking for a good soup to bring to a friend who needs extra support. The creamy barley and salty shiitakes are an especially comforting combination.

Makes about 1 ½ quarts

2 medium leeks  
6 ounces fresh shiitake mushrooms  
2 to 3 inches fresh ginger  
6 cups water  
Splash of distilled, wine, or cider vinegar  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
2 teaspoons tamari or soy sauce  
½ cup pearly barley  
1 cup roughly chopped spinach (about 2 ounces)  
¼ cup miso paste (red, white, or a combination)  
¼ cup thinly sliced scallions (whites and light greens)  
½ sheet nori seaweed, cut into matchsticks with scissors

1. First, get the broth together. Cut off the root and toughest part of the green of each of the leeks, tossing the green scraps into a large saucepan. Cut the stem off each shiitake, and toss the stems into the saucepan as well. Peel the ginger with the tip of a spoon, and add the peels to the saucepan. Top off the scraps with the water, cover, and bring the mixture to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low to bring the liquid to a lively simmer. Let the stock cook while you begin the soup.



2. Cut each leek in half lengthwise and slice into thin half-moons. Put the leek slices in a bowl, cover with water, and add the vinegar to help release the grit. Use a damp cloth to wipe the surface of each mushroom. Slice the mushroom caps into ¼-inch slices. Finally, mince the ginger; you should have about 3 tablespoons.

3. Heat the oil in a medium stockpot or saucepan over medium heat. Use a slotted spoon or skimmer to lift the leeks out of the water, shaking them over the bowl to get rid of excess moisture. Add the leek and ginger to the oil and cook, stirring frequently, until the leeks are soft, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the shiitakes and tamari, and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the shiitakes shrink, first turning white and then deepening to a very light brown, about 7 minutes. Stir in the barley. Set a fine-meshed strainer over the pot, and pour in the mushroom-leek stock, discarding the scraps. Cover the pot, bring to a boil, and lower the heat to medium-low. Cook, covered, until the barley is tender and the broth is a bit creamy, 18 to 20 minutes.

4. Stir in the spinach and continue to cook for another 2 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat. Measure the miso into a small bowl or measuring cup and use a ladle to add a bit of liquid from the soup to the miso paste. Stir, and keep adding liquid until the miso is the texture of thin pureed soup. Pour the miso into the pot, stirring to combine. Taste the soup, and add a bit more tamari if it needs more seasoning. Ladle into bowls, and top with scallions and nori matchsticks.



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