



Slow Cooker Split Pea Soup

Make no bones about it, you can still have a tasty slow-cooker split pea soup without a holiday ham. BY DIANE UNGER



We double up on ham for this meaty, comforting, supersimple soup.

SPLIT PEA SOUP is a cold-weather favorite, appreciated for its stick-to-your-ribs richness, meaty flavor, and frugality. It's typically made a couple of days after a bone-in ham has been served for Sunday supper or a holiday celebration, once the prized slices have been made into sandwiches. The ham bone, with lots of meat still crumbly clinging to it, is tossed into a pot with aromatics (celery, carrot, onion) and covered with broth or water and a bag of inexpensive dried split green peas. A few hours of simmering later, you're rewarded with a filling pea soup studded with tiny bits of smoky ham. I wanted to put my slow cooker to work and make a hammy split pea soup without the advantage of a leftover ham bone and with minimal up-front work, so I could make it at any time.

I tried a few existing recipes designed for the slow cooker, with varying results. Many turned out watery, while others were so thick you could stand a spoon in them. I knew I could do better.

Since I didn't have a meaty ham bone hanging around, I looked for a decent

substitute. After trying ham steak, ham hocks, Canadian bacon, and even smoked pork chops, I settled on the winning combination of a smoked ham hock and a meaty, 1-pound ham steak. The gnarly looking hock boosted the smoky, porky presence throughout the soup, while the ham steak broke down into tender chunks that were easily shredded with two forks at the end of cooking.

For the aromatic component of my soup, side-by-side tests proved that, although traditional, carrot was unnecessary—we preferred soup without its sweetness. I stuck to onion, celery, and garlic, microwaved with 2 tablespoons of butter to soften the garlic's harsh edge. After I'd set the ham steak and hock in the slow cooker, I added the onion mixture and 1 pound of rinsed split green peas.

Some newer recipes for split pea soup call for chicken broth, but I recalled a time when my mother would make split pea soup with just water. I did a three-way test using all broth, all water, and equal parts water and broth. Hands

down, my tasters preferred the soup made with just water. The pork's meaty, smoky flavor stood out, and you could really taste the peas.

All that was left was seasoning. To keep it simple, I used only pantry staples: dried thyme and bay leaves for an herby aroma and red pepper flakes for a subtle punch. After about 6 hours on high (or 8 to 9 hours on low), the peas were tender, the ham hock had given up a generous amount of flavor, and the ham steak was perfectly tender, primed for shredding. A quick 30-second stir with a whisk sealed the deal on a velvety texture.

SLOW-COOKER SPLIT PEA SOUP

Serves 6 to 8

Ham hocks add a deep, meaty flavor to soups and other recipes. Cut from the ankle joint of the hog's leg, hocks contain a great deal of bone, fat, and connective tissue, which lend complex flavor and a rich, salty texture to soups. They can most often be found near the ham and bacon in the supermarket.

- 7 cups water
- 1 pound green split peas (2 cups), picked over and rinsed
- 1 (1-pound) ham steak, rind discarded, quartered
- 1 (12-ounce) smoked ham hock
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 celery rib, minced
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- Salt and pepper
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon dried thyme
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes

1. Combine water, peas, ham steak, ham hock, and bay leaves in slow cooker. Microwave onions, celery, butter, garlic, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt, thyme, and pepper flakes in covered bowl until onions are soft, about 5 minutes. Transfer to slow cooker. Cover and cook until peas are tender, 8 to 9 hours on low or 5 to 6 hours on high.

2. Transfer ham steak pieces to plate. Discard ham hock and bay leaves. Whisk soup vigorously until peas are broken down and soup thickens, about 30 seconds. Using two forks, shred ham steak into bite-size pieces and return to soup. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve.