



## Country Chickpea Soup with Fennel and Pecorino Romano

There are many reasons why I love this dish and why I make it as often as I do. The first, of course, is that it's delicious. The second is that it's one of the quickest and easiest dishes in my repertoire. And last, but not least, it's relatively healthy and very low in fat.

Beyond that, I like serving meatless meals once or twice a week, and this is a very satisfying contender. Although this dish is officially called "soup," it's thick and almost stewlike. And as with most bean soups, I follow it with a mixed green salad and serve with crusty bread. If you have leftovers, that's a bonus.

2	large bulbs fennel
2 to 3 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
2	onions, chopped
5	cloves garlic, finely chopped
1/4 cup	finely chopped parsley
	Small end piece of Pecorino Romano cheese (about a 1-inch cube) (optional)
2	cans (each 28 oz) whole tomatoes, drained and chopped
4	cans (each 16 oz) chickpeas, rinsed and drained
4 cups	chicken stock, vegetable stock or water
1 tbsp	chopped fresh oregano or 2 tsp dried
	Salt and freshly ground pepper
6 to 8	thin slices day-old bread (preferably a rustic, country-style bread like pain au levain)
2	cloves garlic, peeled and left whole
	Finely chopped parsley for garnish
	Grated Pecorino Romano for serving

Prepare fennel: Remove and discard stalks. (I sometimes rinse them, trim the ends and munch on the stalks while preparing this dish.) If there are any fronds and they look fresh, finely chop and set aside. Cut fennel bulbs in half. Then place each half cut-side down on work

surface and cut in half again. Remove and discard core from each piece and slice crosswise into 1/2-inch strips. Place in strainer and rinse with cold water. Let drain and set aside.

In heavy soup pot, heat olive oil until hot. Add onions, garlic and parsley and cook, stirring, until onion is tender, about 6 to 8 minutes. If you have a small, older piece of Pecorino Romano in the fridge, this is a good way to use it. Add a small piece to the pot. Otherwise, use a fresh piece.

Add fennel and fronds and continue cooking, stirring often, until fennel is translucent, about 8 to 10 minutes longer. Add tomatoes, chickpeas, soup stock or water, oregano and salt and pepper to taste. Bring to boil, reduce heat and simmer, partially covered, for about 40 minutes or longer, up to 1 hour. Turn off heat.

Meanwhile, prepare garlic toasts: Place bread on baking sheet and place in 400F oven, turning once or twice, until bread is toasted. This should take about 10 to 15 minutes but check frequently so bread doesn't burn; it should be golden brown and crisp. Remove from oven and rub all over with whole cloves of garlic. Set aside until serving time.

To serve: Place a slice of garlic toast in each large shallow soup bowl. Then ladle soup into each bowl. Sprinkle with parsley and a little cheese on top. Pass the remaining cheese around the table.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Jim White: As the origins of this soup are Italian, and most likely Sardinian (if you really want to zero in), I often choose a hearty Italian table red to accompany it. Or, if I want to drink domestic, I'll select a favorite Sangiovese, like the one from Long Vineyards.