

Carrot soup with orange flower cream and spicy almonds

I'd say this soup was Moroccan, although I've never had it in Morocco. In fact I've only ever had it in my own kitchen, after experimenting with several flavours which are often combined in Moroccan cuisine. Travelling in Morocco we often found carrot combined with oranges and orange flower water for desserts. Carrot is also mixed with cumin, garlic and parsley in the common cooked carrot salad you will get as a starter. Almonds are found in many Moroccan dishes, sweet and savoury. I think this soup works brilliantly, but I'm biased, so you'll have to let me know...



For an easier version, simply omit all the garnishes, or make carrot soup with ginger as described below. This simple carrot soup was one of the dishes I made while helping out chef Mona Talbott in the American Academy's wonderful kitchen in Rome last June. The trick with any puréed carrot soup is the amount of time you cook the carrots; too short and the soup will not purée silky smooth; too long and you will lose the bright carrot colour and flavour. So keep checking the carrots as they cook.

Serves: 4+ as a starter or 2+ as a meal in itself

Total time: 40 mins

1 medium onion, finely sliced

olive oil

salt

500g of peeled and evenly sliced carrots

bouquet garni of one small sprig of thyme, a parsley stalk and a bay leaf

garnishes:

75 ml whipping cream, well chilled

¼ tsp orange flower water, or to taste

2-3 tbsps argan oil* (or olive, walnut, hazelnut, sesame or groundnut)

1 heaped tsp ground mixed Moroccan spices, ie caraway & cumin with a little hot chilli

1 clove garlic, peeled and bruised

2 tbsps flaked almonds

coarse flaky salt, eg Maldon

1 tbsp chopped fresh parsley

1. Cook onion in a generous slug of olive oil with a pinch of salt over a very low heat, covered, stirring occasionally. Cook until they are totally soft but not at all coloured. This will take around 15 minutes.

2. Meanwhile prepare carrots and when onions are ready add them to saucepan along with another good pinch of salt, the bouquet garni and enough water to barely cover vegetables. Bring to a boil then simmer until carrots are totally tender.
3. Meanwhile prepare garnishes. Add orange flower water to cream and whip. Return to fridge. Gently *warm* oil with spices and garlic for a few minutes to infuse. Add almond flakes and *gently* fry until golden, stirring frequently. Lift almonds from oil, remove garlic and sprinkle them with coarse salt.
4. To finish the soup, remove herbs, blend until smooth, adjust consistency by adding water if needed, and season with salt as desired.
5. Garnish each bowl of soup with a dollop of orange flower cream, a sprinkle of spicy almonds and parsley and a little drizzle of any remaining spicy oil.

Simple alternative: Carrot soup with ginger

1 medium onion, finely sliced

olive oil

salt

500g of peeled and evenly sliced carrots

bouquet garni of one small sprig of thyme, a parsley stalk and a bay leaf

piece of fresh root ginger, peeled (scraping off the skin with a teaspoon works really well)

Make the soup as above. While the soup is cooking, finely grate or pound the ginger and then squeeze it through some muslin to catch the juice. Just before serving stir in some ginger juice. Taste as you add – I would say you want just enough to give the soup a slight bright zingy note, but not so much as to detract from its essential carrotyness.

*** Argan oil notes**

Argan oil is only produced in **Morocco**, the only country in which the ancient argan tree grows. The region from Essaouira to Agadir and inland, particularly the Souss Valley, is full of scrawny, wild, drought resistant argan trees. Families have collected, cracked and ground argan nuts for their own homemade oil for **centuries**.



Now, increasingly, there are women's cooperatives for argan oil production, as we found while exploring the region last October. This is largely a very good thing, giving poor communities a source of **income** and women a degree of **independence**, whilst also helping protect the natural environment. But the tourist should beware of some fake '**coopératives féminines d'huile d'argan**', which are neither cooperative nor run by women nor selling pure argan oil, when you look behind the screens.



We found an excellent cooperative called **Tamounte**, in Imin'Tlit, where we learnt all about the process and even had a go. It is a long and intensive process. 35kg of fruits, harvested in the summer, are needed to make just 1 litre of oil. To turn them into oil they must be dried, depulped, cracked open to find the kernels,

which are then toasted (for the darker nuttier version), ground to a paste and pressed to release the oil, which is finally filtered. Residues and side products are used in soap-making and for animal feed. Machines have replaced women's hands for some stages of the process, but the tricky nut-cracking step is still done by hand, **nut-by-nut-by-nut**.

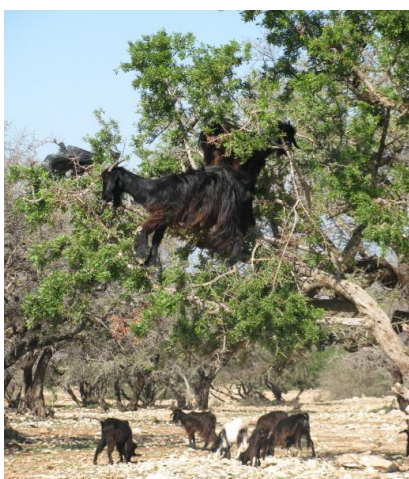
All this labour, plus the fact that the price of unprocessed argan fruits has recently risen to nearly 5 dirhams (40p) a kilogram due to drought, explains why argan oil is **not cheap**. You might think that £15 or more for half a litre or less is extortionate, but if you do the maths you realise it isn't.



For the women earning a small income here, this is often their third job. The '**travail triple**', as it is called, also includes all the domestic chores for the household and much of the agricultural labour in the family's fields. For cracking argan nuts, they can earn cash for themselves (their menfolk will be controlling the income from any vegetables sold at market), although only 35 dirhams (£2.77) per kilogram of kernels produced. In a day, a fast nut-cracker can probably produce 1¼ kg of kernels, which isn't even enough for 1 litre of oil!

So I'd say it's worth the price tag. Argan oil has a **unique** and interesting flavour, and you don't need much to transform a dish. It's at its best used cold or slightly warmed, drizzled over salads, couscous dishes, eggs and tagines. The flavour and colour depend on how the nuts were processed and if the kernels were toasted, ranging from very light to deep orange with a **warm, toasty, nutty** and occasionally animally flavour. You can fry with it, but some flavour will be lost.

One delicious way to use it is in a paste or dip made with ground almonds and honey. In Morocco this is '**amlou**'; we had the most delicious version of all at the Tamounte cooperative, with freshly baked Moroccan bread and, of course, little glasses of mint tea.



One final note... there is a story that argan oil production involves **goats**, and, er, their **poo**. It is said that the goats climb the trees, eat the fruits, then return to their owners where they do their business and the prospective oil makers pick out the nuts, handily not only picked and transported for them, but also depulped. We were delighted to find that this story is **entirely true** except that the goats actually **regurgitate** (ie sick up) the nuts, rather than passing them out the other end. So that's OK then. This accounts for the distinct animal note you get in some argan oils. You may be reassured to know that a professional cooperative like Tamounte does not use these fruits; theirs have never seen the insides of a goat. But the practice is still common in small-scale family production.