

Enchanting Chile Pequeño Soup

Some green peppers that are left on the plant turn brilliant red. They are often braided and strung together into strings called ristras and hung outside to dry. Once dried, these red chiles can be stored - still on its string - for later use in a variety of enchanting dishes, including soup.

Fire up a chilly autumn evening with a bowl of steaming soup punctuated with dried chile pequeño. Chile pequeño (meaning small) is also known as pequín chile and is often spelled "piquín". Spelling aside, this tiny (about ½ inch) oval, reddish-orange pepper is capsaicin-hot. Legend has it that the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico's Sonoran Desert used these "lethal" peppers to protect themselves against the evils of sorcery. Some so-called Chileheads, especially those of Texas persuasion, are said to eat them right off the bush! This New Mexico Chilehead, on the other hand, favors them crushed in a variety of recipes. Each pepper pellet delivers a sensational smoky and semi-sweet flavor that works well in vinegars, oils, salsas, sauces, and soups.



Serves 4

- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 Russet potatoes, peeled and diced ¼ -inch thick
- 1 large sweet white onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 large red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- ½ to 1 teaspoon chile pequín
- (For hot-headed chile aficionados, add 3 or 4 tablespoons or more!)
- 3 (14.5 ounces) cans diced tomatoes
- 1 cup vegetable broth
- 2 cups half-and-half
- 1½ teaspoons sea salt*
- 1½ teaspoons white pepper
- Cilantro for garnish

In a Dutch oven, melt 4 tablespoons butter over moderate to high heat. Add potatoes and sauté them for about 5 minutes. Add the onions, bell pepper and chile pequín and sauté about 2 minutes more. Add tomatoes and vegetable broth.

Bring liquid to a boil and then reduce the heat to a simmer, uncovered, until the vegetables are tender or for about 25 minutes. Cool. Refrigerate overnight to blend and intensify flavors. Transfer ingredients (in batches) to a blender and purée. Place the purée in a Dutch oven or large saucepan over medium to high heat. Add the half-and-half, salt, pepper and remaining butter.

Serve in heated bowls, garnished with sprigs of fresh cilantro. Cornbread muffins fresh from the oven and smothered in butter round out the meal.

*Sea salt, I believe, delivers a tad more flavor than table salt.