

White Bean, Pasta and Sausage Soup (Pasta e Fagioli)

1-1/2 cups (8 oz) dried Great Northern or small white beans
8 oz. mild Italian sausage (use "hot" if you desire)
2 oz. pancetta
1 large onion chopped
1 large carrot finely chopped
2 tablespoons dried currants
1 teaspoon dried basil
1 1/2 quarts regular-strength chicken broth
3 C water
1 can (14 1/2 oz) pear-shaped tomatoes
1 C (3 oz.) dry large shell-shaped pasta
Grated parmesan cheese

Sort beans and discard any debris; rinse well and drain. Set beans aside.

Remove and discard casings from sausages. Then crumble meat into large chunks into a 5 qt. pan. Add pancetta and cook over high heat, stirring occasionally until lightly browned. (3 to 5 minutes)

Discard all but 2 T of fat. Add onion, garlic, and carrot, stirring often, until onion begins to soften (2 to 3 minutes). Stir in beans, currants, basil, broth and water. Bring to a boil; reduce heat, cover and boil gently until beans are tender to bite. (2 to 2 1/2 hours)

Add tomatoes (break up with a spoon) and their liquid, then stir in pasta. Return to a boil. Cover and boil until pasta is just tender to bite (*al dente*).

Skim off and discard any fat from soup. Serve with cheese.

Note: Finely sliced swiss chard makes a nice addition to the soup.