


# Mushroom Hot Pot

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Serves 6

Time: 1 hour || Active time: 30 minutes



Autumn in Omaha is slightly magical. The light seems to come in two varieties, silver or gold, and sometimes the glow makes it feel like the prairies are threatening to take over; the concrete will start falling away and luscious grasses will spring up everywhere, wildflowers and meadow as far as the eye can see.

It was a day like this when these flavors seemed to possess me. I was planning on a simple soup for lunch, standing in the produce aisle, examining some veggie or other, when seemingly out of nowhere, my senses were overtaken by star anise, lemongrass, ginger. Then the words formed on my lips: *hot pot*. The name alone should win you over on a rainy autumn day.

I first had Hot Pot at a Vietnamese restaurant, and you often see it on menus called “Mongolian Hot Pot.” But I’m not going to get into the history, primarily because I only have a GED, but also because I want to get to the fun part. The experience!

The idea is similar to fondue. A simmering vessel of rich broth surrounded by delicious tidbits that you can mix and match in your own bowl. You can totally dip, too, but I think it's more satisfying (and perhaps neater) to have your own little serving.

If you're looking at the ingredients list and thinking that you don't have any of these items laying around your kitchen, can I appeal to the part of you that looks past pantry ingredients, and speak to your heart instead? It is always worth it to branch out and add new things to your repertoire. It doesn't have to be this recipe, maybe you grew up eating star anise and lemongrass, but remember to try something new on occasion. Great cooking, like a great road movie, isn't always about the destination – half the fun is just getting there.

That being said, this isn't particularly time consuming or anything, and all of the ingredients can easily be found at Whole Foods. They're not very expensive, either!

I use dried shiitakes because they have an even more concentrated flavor than fresh and they're also much cheaper. And since hot pot is often served with thinly sliced meats, these meaty morsels really do the job.

And speaking of prairie grasses, have you cooked much with lemongrass? It adds a sultry perfume to stews, and it's really just a fun ingredient to work with. Who doesn't want to walk around the grocery store with tall stalks of grass poking out of their cart? You only use the inner core of the the bulb at the very bottom of the stalk. Peel away the outer leaves until you get to the smooth, cool, core. Cut off a sliver of the bottom, and mince. You'll probably need 3 stalks for this recipe. You can also reserve the rest of the stalk for a broth.

And if you're not going in for the whole ceremony of it, that's fine, too. At it's most basic, this is just a really delicious soup that will warm you right up. I'd say that the only necessary serving suggestions are the fresh herbs, everything else is up to you in terms of what you have time for, how many people you're serving and how hungry everyone is.

And one last thing, I don't actually have a fondue pot or anything. You can just place the pot on a trivet in the middle of the table. It won't have a chance to get cold!



**4 cups mushroom or vegetable broth**

**1 tablespoon organic cornstarch**

**1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil (regular vegetable oil will do, too)**

**1 red onion, thinly sliced**

**1 red bell pepper, thinly sliced**

**Big pinch salt**

**3 cloves garlic, minced**

**2 tablespoons minced lemongrass**

**1 tablespoon minced ginger**

**1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes**

**2 star anise**

**1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon**

**1 oz dried shiitakes**

**2 tablespoons soy sauce (or tamari to make it gluten free)**

**1 roughly chopped tomato**

**Fresh black pepper**

**15 oz can lite coconut milk**

**Juice of half a lime**

*To serve (obviously just pick and choose, these are just suggestions):*

*Cooked rice noodles or jasmine rice*

*Fresh cilantro*

*Fresh basil (thai basil if you can find it)*

*Grilled tofu (seasoned simply with sesame oil, black pepper and salt)*

*Roasted cashews*

*Cooked aduki beans*

*Thinly sliced sauteed seitan*

*Steamed broccoli or cauliflower*

*Finely sliced bok choy*

*Extra wedges of fresh lime*

Preheat a 4 quart pot over medium heat. Mix the cornstarch into the broth and set aside (this is easiest if you just mix it into about a cup of broth, then pour the rest of the broth in.) Saute onion and pepper in the oil with a big pinch of salt, until onions are soft, about 5 minutes.

Add garlic, lemongrass, ginger and red pepper flakes and mix in. Cook until fragrant, about a minute, then stream in the broth/cornstarch mixture and add most of the other ingredients: star anise, cinnamon, shiitakes, soy sauce, tomatoes and fresh black pepper. Stir often for the first 10 minutes or so, until the cornstarch has thickened the broth a bit. Now cover pot and bring to a boil. Once boiling, lower heat to simmer and cook covered for a good half hour, until mushrooms are completely softened.

Add coconut milk and lime, and taste for salt. Heat through and serve with fresh herbs and other accoutrement.