Garlic Soup

2 T peanut oil
1 leek, white and tender green, halved lengthwise and cut into 1-inch pieces
1 large onion, finely chopped
30 to 40 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
2 C chicken stock or canned low-sodium broth
1 pound potatoes, peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
Salt and freshly-ground black pepper
2 chunks good-quality French bread, crust removed and cut into 1/2 inch cubes
1 T olive oil
1 C half and half
Finely-chopped fresh chervil, chives, tarragon, parsley or basil

Preheat oven to 400°F. In a large saucepan, heat the peanut oil. Add the leek, onion and garlic and cook over moderately high heat, stirring occasionally, until just softened (about 2 minutes). Add the chicken stock, potato chunks, 1 t salt, 1/2 t pepper, and 1 1/2 C water; bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer until the vegetables are tender (about 20 minutes).

In a medium bowl, toss the bread cubes with the olive oil (and, if you like, with pepper and herbs). Spread cubes on a baking sheet and toast in the oven for about 6 minutes or until golden.

Strain the soup into a clean saucepan. In a blender or food processor, puree the vegetables with a little of the liquid until smooth. Return the puree to the pan and stir in the milk. Bring the soup just to a simmer over moderately high heat. Season with salt and pepper and serve in shallow bowls, garnished with chopped fresh herbs and the croutons.

Options and notes:

Spring garlic, full of fresh, milky juice, is best for this soup, but any fresh garlic will work. Increase or decrease the amount of garlic to taste.

The original version of this soup calls for heavy cream. I’ve tried to strike a balance between the high-fat cream and the thinner milk option. You can also cut back on the water.

For a chunkier soup, break up the ingredients by whisking in the pot, rather than putting them through a blender or food processor.

To add pizzazz to leftover soup, add shredded spinach before reheating.

Serve with bread, a salad and a light red; the original recipe recommends a West Coast Pinot Noir.

—Based on a recipe by Jacques Pépin, appearing in Food & Wine, February 1997, p. 46.