

Spring Vegetable Minestra

1 small fennel bulb cut into small dice
1/4 lb sliced pancetta, chopped
1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
2 medium carrots, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1/4 small cabbage, cored and chopped (2 cups)
1 (2-inch) piece of rind cut from a wedge of Parmigiano-Reggiano (optional)
2 small zucchini, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1 medium boiling potato, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
2 sprigs fresh thyme
1 bay leaf
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
9 cups water
1/2 lb. fresh lima beans
1/2 lb. fresh fava beans
1/2 lb thin green beans, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
1 (15- to 19-oz) can cannellini or other white beans, drained and rinsed
5 oz baby spinach (5 cups) cleaned and coarsely chopped

Make soup: Cut fennel stalks flush with bulb, discarding them, and trim off any tough outer layers from bulb. Chop fennel into 1/2-inch pieces.

Cook pancetta in oil in a 7- to 9-quart heavy pot over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until just beginning to brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in fennel, onion, carrots, and cabbage and cook, stirring occasionally, until cabbage is wilted, 5 to 7 minutes. Add cheese rind, squash, potato, thyme sprigs, bay leaf, salt, and water and bring to a boil.

Reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, 10 minutes. Add lima beans, fava beans, green beans, and cannellini and simmer until vegetables are tender, about 5 minutes. Discard cheese rind, thyme sprigs, and bay leaf. Stir in spinach and season with salt and pepper.

Makes 6 to 8 (makes about 16 cups) servings