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Recipe Redux: Bouillabaisse, 1904

By AMANDA HESSER

In 1988, The New York Times ran the Le Bernardin chef Gilbert Le Coze's [famed recipe](#) for bouillabaisse, with its 13 steps and 25 ingredients. And that was pretty much the symbolic end for the Marseillaise fish stew: over the years, chefs made it so complicated that no one actually wanted to eat it, let alone source all the fish and cook it.

Bouillabaisse has long had a reputation for being difficult and confusing. In 2002, [R. W. Apple Jr.](#), the Times reporter and noted bon vivant, wrote that “controversy clings to bouillabaisse like barnacles to a ship. Is it a soup? Perhaps not, because the broth and the solids are eaten separately. Is it a stew? Surely not, because a stew by definition is cooked very slowly, and bouillabaisse must be boiled furiously to achieve an amalgamation of olive oil with water and wine. It is best described as a fish boil, which is what its name seems to imply.” Alan Davidson, in “The Oxford Companion to Food,” points out that a 19th-century dictionary by Littré interprets it as bouillon abaissé, or “broth lowered,” meaning the broth is boiled down.

Whatever you want to call it — broth lowered or fish boil, soup or stew — bouillabaisse is meant to contain a bunch of fish, olive oil and water, and is not supposed to take three days to make. A century ago, it was much simpler. It was an ideal dish for home cooks: there was no doting over perfect slices of fish, no high-octane fish stock and no mention of garlicky rouille. It began with water, olive oil and sometimes wine, an onion or two, [tomatoes](#), saffron, some herbs and fish. Then you gave the mix a blast of heat so the oil and broth would come to an excited boil and engulf the aromatics.

The 1904 recipe I settled on contained equal parts water and oil and half the amount of white wine. The saffron- and herb-scented oil insulates the fish and dresses it as the fish breaks down, making for a rich and rustic oily broth. It completely changed my sense of what bouillabaisse could be.

Of course, this old-style version is so unembellished that it's not for everyone. Sang Yoon — the chef at the Father's Office gastropubs in Los Angeles, whom I asked to try the recipe — called it “a head-scratcher.” He and his cooks found it difficult to add so much oil to the soup pot. “It didn't remind me of bouillabaisse or a Provençal fish soup,” Yoon said. But he, like most of us, grew up with Le Coze-style bouillabaisse.

Yoon's main issue with the 1904 recipe was that it wasn't “constructed to maximize flavor.” So he worked up a riveting, modern take on the dish: he slow-poached cod in oil, pulled in a few more flavors from the South of France — fennel, orange and olives — and kept the emphasis on the fish by serving it with a bright and pungent blood-orange sauce. He took bouillabaisse in a direction it desperately needed to go, toward fragrance and zest and far from the salty, spicy broth. I'll make Yoon's recipe for my next dinner party and the 1904 broth “lowered” for Sunday supper.

1904: Bouillabaisse

This appeared in a Times article called "[Bouillabaisse and Chowders: An Eel-Soup Digression — Who Now Get the Best Vegetables and Fruits — A Dear Fish Market.](#)" The author is unknown. You may halve the amount of oil if you find it alarming.

1 cup olive oil

2 medium [tomatoes](#), peeled, seeded and sliced

1 small onion, thinly sliced

1 carrot, peeled and very thinly sliced

2 pinches saffron

1 bay leaf

4 sprigs parsley

2 cloves garlic

1 pound each boned and skinned cod and halibut (fluke or sea bass may be substituted for either), cut into 2-inch pieces

2 cups peeled and deveined medium shrimp

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 cup rich fish broth

1/2 cup white wine

6 slices toasted country bread.

1. In a large saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the tomatoes, onion, carrot, saffron, bay leaf and parsley. Peel and crush 1 garlic clove and add it to the pan. Add the fish, shrimp and lemon juice, season with salt and pepper and boil for 10 minutes. Add the fish broth and wine, bring to a rapid simmer and cook until the fish is just cooked through. Adjust the seasoning, adding more saffron, lemon juice, salt and pepper as desired.

2. Rub the toasts with the remaining peeled garlic clove. Set a toast in the bottom of each of 6 bowls and ladle the soup on top. Serves 6.

2010: Olive-Oil-Poached Cod With Saffron-Blood-Orange Nage

By Sang Yoon, the chef at Father's Office in Los Angeles

For the fish:

Salt

Two 6-ounce pieces cod

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil, for poaching

Grated zest of 1 lemon

For the nage:

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 shallot, thinly sliced

2 cloves garlic, smashed

1/2 cup dry white wine

1/2 cup shrimp stock (see note)

1 cup fish stock

1 bay leaf

Pinch saffron

Grated zest of 1/2 blood orange

Grated zest of 1/2 lemon

1/8 teaspoon fennel seed

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

Juice of 1 blood orange

To finish:

1 teaspoon honey

2 ounces unsalted butter, softened

2 tablespoons chopped olives or capers

1/2 cup chopped [tomatoes](#) or cherry tomato halves

2 tablespoons lemon juice

White pepper and sea salt

Shaved fennel and parsley leaves, for serving.1. For the fish: Prepare the brine. Pour 2½ cups warm water

into a bowl, add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup salt and stir until dissolved. Chill. Immerse the fish in the cold brine. Let sit for 10 minutes; pat dry.

2. Heat the oil to 130 degrees in a small pot with the lemon zest. Add the fish, making sure it's completely covered; otherwise baste frequently with oil. Poach the fish until just cooked through, 25 to 30 minutes.

3. For the nage: Heat the oil in a medium saucepan over medium-low heat. Add the shallot and garlic and cook until softened and translucent (do not allow to brown). Add the wine and stocks. Stir in the bay leaf, saffron, zests, fennel seed, paprika and orange juice. Cook, uncovered, over medium heat until reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$, about 30 minutes. Strain and cool.

4. Return the nage to a small saucepan. Bring to a low simmer over medium-low heat. Stir in the honey. Whisk in the butter. Add the olives or capers, tomatoes and lemon juice. Season to taste. Garnish with shaved fennel and parsley leaves. Serves 2.

NOTE: To make shrimp stock, combine the shells from 1 pound of shrimp with $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups water in a medium saucepan. Place over high heat and boil until reduced to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup. Strain.

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