





One Stock Makes Three Flavorful Fish Stews

Mastering the fish-stock base lets you easily make a creamy chowder, a tangy salmon soup, or a hot and spicy court bouillon

BY KATHERINE ALFORD

Seafood aficionados claim that there are as many fish stews as there are cooks, but despite the vast variety of recipes, they all have one thing in common: a base of good fish stock. Whether fragrant and spicy, thick and creamy, or simple and brothy, a fish stew needs fish stock.

Fortunately, this important component takes very little time to make (less than an hour), and it freezes well so you can always have it on hand. With a quart or two in the freezer, it's easy to cook up your own favorite fish soup or stew.

GOOD STOCK NEEDS GOOD BONES

Fish stock is made by gently cooking fish bones, heads, and other fish trimmings with aromatic vegetables in water. The heads, a rich source of gelatin, contribute body and depth of flavor, but if you can't get them, you can still make a fine stock

with just bones. Scraps of fillet are always a welcome addition, but don't use the skin or gills: these turn stock gray and bitter.

The best fish bones for stock are those from fish with sweet, white flesh, such as flounder, sole, sea bass, snapper, or cod. Avoid bones from strongly flavored, oil-rich fish, such as salmon, bluefish, and mackerel.

Shop for bones the same way you shop for fish—with your nose. Fresh fish bones smell clean and sweet, not strong or fishy. A good fish store that fillets fish daily is usually your best bet for fresh bones. Today, however, as supermarkets replace neighborhood fishmongers, buying good fish bones can be the most taxing part of the recipe. Here are a couple of strategies I use to get what I need.

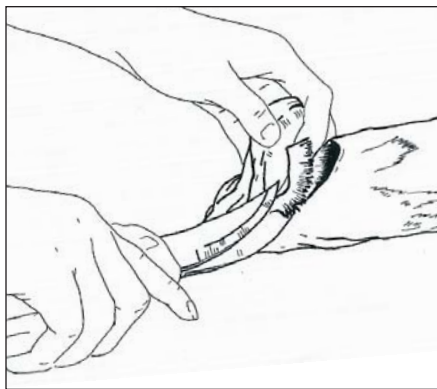
◆ Consider buying whole fish whenever possible and freezing the bones until you have enough to make stock. Filleting fish yourself isn't difficult and promises a fresher fillet. Or, ask the fish department to do it for you and to give you the bones in a separate bag. Clean them thoroughly, seal them in plastic, and freeze if you're not making stock right away. They'll last for three to four months.

◆ Anytime you prepare shrimp or lobster, freeze the shells and lobster bodies and add them to your next fish stock. They're a great flavor enhancer for the basic stock.



Choose bones from mild white fish, such as sole, snapper, or cod, and cook them for a few minutes before adding the wine and water.

First things first: clean the bones thoroughly



Snip the reddish gills from the head with scissors or a knife.



Scrape any dark tissue from the backbone area with the tip of a knife.

CLEAN BONES MEAN BETTER FLAVOR

Carefully cleaned bones will produce a stock with the flavor of a clean ocean breeze. Skip this step and you'll wind up with something that tastes more like low tide. Begin by pulling away any remaining viscera or eggs. Then, with a knife or kitchen shears, remove the reddish gills from the head. At the top of the stomach cavity there are often traces of purplish tissue that must be cleaned out; the tip of a knife works well to scrape this area clean. When everything is clean, break the skeleton into smaller pieces and rinse the bones under cold water until the water runs clear.

AROMATICS ADD FLAVOR, TOO

In addition to the standard trinity of carrots, onions, and celery, the white part of a leek and a bit of fennel are classic aromatics for fish stock. Some cooks further modify the mix by omitting the celery (because of its strong flavor) or the carrots (because they lend a golden hue to the stock). Mushrooms can give fish stock an earthy flavor; a tomato contributes bright acid and a rosy color. Cut the vegetables into small pieces so they'll cook in the relatively brief time the stock simmers.

GENTLE HEAT COAXES THE BEST FROM ALL THE INGREDIENTS

Sweating is the gentle process of low-heat sautéing in butter or oil to enhance the sweetness and extract the juices from the ingredients. When sweating vegetables, cover the pot to help retain all the juices and prevent browning.



Instead of using a traditional stockpot, which is taller than it is wide, use a wide soup kettle to make cooking the bones easier. Sweat the vegetables first. When they've softened, either push them aside or remove them to clear the stage for cooking the bones. Turn up the heat to medium-high and lay the bones in the pot. After a minute or two, when they begin to turn white, flip them with tongs or a wooden spoon to cook the other side.

When both sides are cooked, add a splash of dry white wine (to give the finished stock a touch of acid) and just enough water to cover the bones. If you've removed the aromatic vegetables, return them to the pot.

As the liquid comes to the boil, a grayish foam will rise to the top. Skim this and reduce the heat to the barest simmer. The stove is set at just the right temperature if you watch the stock for a minute and see only a few bubbles burst on the surface. Continue to skim the stock as it simmers gently.

After thirty minutes, the stock should smell sweet and concentrated. Overcooked fish stock is a bitter broth, so keep an eye on the pot. Strain the stock and chill it by pouring it into unbreakable containers and setting them in icy water for 20 minutes or so. As the stock chills, a cloudy layer of residual protein may fall to the bottom of the container. It won't interfere with the flavor, but if you're after a clear broth, hold this back when adding the stock to your recipe. Fish stock will last for two days in the refrigerator or three to four months in the freezer. Thawed stock can be refrozen without harm.

Since each fish stew recipe requires only a few cups of homemade fish stock, I make a big batch and freeze it in small containers for later use. Then when I get the urge for a creamy chowder or spicy Louisiana court bouillon, all I need is a bit of fresh fish and some inspiration.

THREE OF MY FAVORITE FISH STEWS

Depending on your appetite, there are several ways to turn a neutral stock into a flavorful stew. The recipes that follow include three distinct examples: the chowder is richly thickened with cream and flour, while the court bouillon is spicy and hearty with the addition of a dark roux, and the Russian-inspired solianka is brothy and bold with tomatoes and sauerkraut brine. Don't hesitate to substitute and improvise: half the fun of making fish stew is buying what's best at the market and making up the recipe as you go.

Basic Fish Stock

Yields about 9 cups.

3 Tbs. olive oil or unsalted butter
1 leek, white and light green parts only, thinly sliced and washed
1 medium onion, thinly sliced
1 large rib celery, with leaves, thinly sliced
1 medium carrot, thinly sliced

One batch of stock makes enough for all three fish stew recipes. Divide the stock into small portions to keep on hand in the freezer.



Creole Court Bouillon is a spicy ragoût of tomatoes, peppers, and snapper. It's thickened with a dark roux and enriched with red wine.

2 or 3 large sprigs fresh fennel or 1 tsp. dried fennel seeds
2 lb. cleaned bones of mild fish (sea bass, cod, snapper, flounder), cut into 4- to 5-inch pieces
1 cup dry white wine
4 sprigs flat-leaf parsley
1 bay leaf
4 peppercorns
9 cups cold water

In a large, broad soup kettle, heat 1½ Tbs. of the oil. Add the leek, onion, celery, carrot, and fennel and cook over medium-low heat, covered, until the vegetables have softened, about 15 min. Stir the vegetables a few times so they don't brown. Remove the vegetables from the pot and set aside. Increase the heat to medium-high and add the remaining 1½ Tbs. oil. Lay the bones as evenly as possible on the bottom of the pot. Cook until the bones turn white, 1 to 2 min. Flip them with tongs or a wooden spoon and cook the other side for 1 to 2 min. Add the wine to the pan and bring to a boil. Return the vegetables to the pot and add the parsley, bay leaf, and peppercorns. Add the water, bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, skim, and cook uncovered 30 min. Strain the stock, discarding the bones and vegetables. Chill the stock if you're not using it immediately.

Creole Court Bouillon

The dark roux that gives this stew its ruddy, down-to-earth flavor is best made in a cast-iron skillet, but any heavy-based pan will do. *Serves four.*

FOR THE ROUX:
2 Tbs. vegetable oil
3 Tbs. flour

FOR THE COURT BOUILLON:
1 Tbs. vegetable oil
½ cup sliced scallions
1 green bell pepper, diced *(Ingredient list continues)*



1 rib celery, with leaves, diced
 1 cup diced onion
 3 cloves garlic, minced
 1 cup red wine
 1 bay leaf
 ½ tsp. dried thyme
 ½ tsp. ground allspice
 1 tsp. cayenne; more or less to taste
 2 cups canned tomatoes, chopped, with juice
 2 cups fish stock
 Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
 1¾ lb. snapper fillet (skin removed), cut into 2-inch chunks
 2 Tbs. minced flat-leaf parsley

To make a dark roux—In a small, heavy skillet (preferably cast-iron), heat the oil over medium heat. Sift in the flour and cook, whisking frequently, until the mixture turns a rich mahogany brown, 10 to 12 min. Set aside.

To make the court bouillon—In a medium stew pot, heat the oil. Add the scallions, bell pepper, celery, onion, and garlic; sauté over medium heat until softened, about 10 min. Add the wine, bring to a boil, and cook until reduced by half. Whisk in the roux, add the bay leaf, thyme, allspice, cayenne, tomatoes, and stock. Simmer over low heat for 20 min. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper if needed. (Court bouillon can be prepared to this point and held for an hour before

refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

When ready to serve, bring the court bouillon to a very low simmer. Add the snapper and cook until the fish is opaque, 5 to 7 min. Add the parsley and ladle the court bouillon into a warmed tureen. Serve immediately.

Seafood Chowder

The rich texture of this chowder is provided by cream and a *beurre manié*, a paste of butter and flour that's whisked into the boiling stock before the seafood is added. *Serves four.*

FOR THE BEURRE MANIÉ:

1 Tbs. unsalted butter, room temperature
 4½ tsp. flour

FOR THE CHOWDER:

4 oz. bacon, cut into ½-inch dice
 1 Tbs. unsalted butter
 1½ cups sliced leeks, white and light green parts only, washed before slicing
 1 rib celery, sliced
 ⅔ cup dry vermouth
 2 cups diced red potatoes, skin left on
 2 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
 2 cups fish stock
 1 cup cream
 12 medium hard-shell clams (about 1¼ lb.), or 12 mussels (⅓ to ½ lb.), or a combination
 12 medium shrimp (about ½ lb.), peeled and deveined
 12 sea scallops (1 to 1¼ lb.), cut into quarters if large
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper
 Pinch cayenne

To make the *beurre manié*—In a small bowl, cream the butter and flour with a wooden spoon to make a paste. Set aside.

To make the chowder—In a small pot of boiling water, blanch the bacon 1 to 2 min. to remove excess salt and fat. Drain.

In a medium stew pot, heat the butter, add the leeks, celery, and bacon. Cook over medium heat until the leeks and celery turn a brighter green without browning, about 2 min. Add the vermouth, bring to a boil, and reduce by one-third. Add the potatoes, thyme, and stock and simmer until the potatoes are tender but not mushy, about 7 min.

Bring the soup to a boil and whisk in the *beurre manié* a spoonful at a time. Pour in the cream and let the soup boil until slightly thickened, about 1 min. When ready to serve, add the clams or mussels and cook, covered, until the shells begin to open, about 2 min. for mussels and 5 min. for clams. Add the shrimp, simmer 1 min., and then add the scallops; cook until the scallops are warmed through, about 1 min. Season to taste with salt, pepper, and cayenne. Serve immediately in warmed bowls.

Salmon Solianka

The distinctive flavor of this Russian-inspired soup comes from the brine from a package of fresh sauerkraut—canned won't do. *Serves four.*

3 Tbs. unsalted butter
 2 cups sliced onions
 5 cups fish stock
 ¼ cup tomato purée
 1 cup drained sauerkraut juice (from a refrigerated package, not a can)
 1 tsp. sugar
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper
 1 tsp. capers
 1 Tbs. pitted, minced brine-cured black olives, such as kalamata
 2 tsp. minced dill pickle
 Zest of 1 lemon, minced
 1 Tbs. minced fresh dill, plus 4 sprigs for garnish
 ¼ lb. oyster mushrooms, sliced
 1¼ lb. salmon fillet (skin removed), cut into 1-inch chunks

In a medium saucepan, melt the butter over medium-low heat. Add the onions, cover the pan, and let cook until tender and sweet, about 20 min. Add the fish stock, tomato purée, sauerkraut juice, and sugar and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 10 min. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper if needed. (The soup can be made to this point 1 day ahead and refrigerated.)

In a small bowl, mix together the capers, olives, pickle, and lemon zest. Set aside. When ready to serve, add the minced dill and mushrooms to the broth and simmer 1 min. Reduce the heat, add the salmon, and poach over low heat until cooked through, 4 to 6 min. Add the caper-olive mixture and gently swirl to combine; be careful not to break up the salmon. Ladle the soup into four warmed soup bowls, garnish with dill sprigs, and serve immediately.

Katherine Alford learned to make fish stews while growing up by the ocean from Cape Cod to the Florida Keys. Today she shops for fish in New York City, where she works as a cooking teacher and food writer. ♦



Creamy Seafood Chowder is rich with scallops, shrimp, clams, and mussels. It's fortified with potatoes and bacon.

serving or



Olives, capers, and lemon zest add zing to tomato-based Salmon Solianka. The briny broth is a perfect match to the rich flavor of salmon.