

The Case for Seafood Stews

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A No-fuss Bouillabaisse from Bruce Weinstein and Mark Scarbrough's "Cooking Know-How" which uses a simple approach to making the popular seafood stew, in a file photo. AP Photo/Larry Crowe



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Commentary

Once I happened upon a hotel buffet and discovered the greatest soup/stew I ever had. It had a tomato base and was packed with all

kinds of things from the sea. It included mussels, clams, shrimp, some white fish, and various other odd things in the mysterious ocean world filled with millions of varieties of living things for us to eat.

I was astounded at how tremendously delicious and gratifying it was. I went back and back again, thinking that this melange was a rarified

elicacy available only in the finest restaurants. Whenever I encountered it on travels or homes, I would cheer it to high heavens. It was a seafood stew, and it has long ranked up at the top of my list of favorite things to eat.

One thing never occurred to me: making it at home. I don't know why. I suppose I thought it was too complicated, too expensive, and I really just did not know where to begin. We are all creatures of habit and so making a seafood stew at home had long evaded my sense of the possible.

At the local fishmonger, there are bass, trout, whiting, snapper, king fish, mackerel, tuna steaks, flounder, salmon, and so much more, and I'm a frequent purchaser of all those wonderful things. Down on the far right, there are other things known as shellfish. They include clams, mussels, conches, shrimp, oysters, scallops, octopus, and many other simple oddities. I've systematically avoided them for years.

For whatever reason, I woke up Friday morning with a determination to figure this out. I bought a bag of mussels, some clams, and shrimp, just as a test. The shells came off the shrimp simply because I cannot stand fussing with those things during dinner.

Next came the olive oil in a big stew pot. I chopped up a heap of jalapenos (removing seeds) and garlic and fried them up a bit before adding the tomato sauce and some salt and pepper. Then a bit of water. I went all the stuff, first the clams because they take longer, then the mussels, and finally the shrimp. The entire thing I let roil around for about 10 minutes or so with the top on.

So far as I could tell, it was all done! So I poured the whole thing into a serving bowl, and there it was, looking wildly exotic and crazy, even



more extreme than the seafood stews I had seen at restaurants.

Then came the test of actually eating. To my amazement, the dish was absolutely perfect. I'm not entirely sure why and I hope I'm correct in having confidence that I could do it again. It was simply marvelous, so much so that I wonder why it has taken me so long to figure out that this is easier than pie.

Of course it is possible to add not only bread or pasta but other sea creatures too. Maybe next time. I'm looking especially at these conches, which are apparently some variety of snail but hard and chewy. Some people recommend pounding them with a hammer and soaking them in salt or sugar. But the fishmonger disagrees: he popped one in his mouth raw, while I was standing there, and swore that it was delicious.

All this seafood is infinitely adaptable, and I can never quite shake my amazement that the seas are completely packed with this stuff. It's like the world was created with its own built-in food source for humans. It's odd how much people tend to neglect what is clearly a natural diet for humans.

It doesn't take long to discover that seafood stew is a feature of all recorded history. It makes sense because fishermen are forever capturing all kinds of crazy things in their nets and need a way to use it. A stew is an obvious answer.

Perhaps the most famous seafood stew, bouillabaisse originates from Marseille, France. Its history dates from ancient Greece, with Marseille being founded by Greek settlers around 600 BC. It was made from the unsold fish of the day, cooked with water, herbs, and sometimes saffron. Over time, it evolved into a more refined dish associated with Provençal cuisine.

In the United States, cioppino was developed by Italian immigrants in San Francisco in the late 19th century. It's believed to have originated in the North Beach area, where fishermen would throw together whatever they had caught into a pot, much like the communal spirit of

bouillabaisse. The name “cioppino” is said to come from the Ligurian dialect word “ciuppin,” which means “to chop” or “chopped,” referring to the way the fish is prepared.

From Portugal, particularly the Algarve region, cataplana is both a stew and the name of the copper cooking vessel used to prepare it. Seafood like clams, shrimp, and fish are layered with onions, peppers, and tomatoes, then steamed in the sealed cataplana, allowing flavors to meld.

Also from Portugal, Caldeirada is a thicker, stew-like dish that varies significantly from region to region but always involves layers of different fish, potatoes, onions, and sometimes tomatoes, cooked slowly.

From Spain, particularly Catalonia, zarzuela is a seafood stew that can include a variety of fish and shellfish, cooked with tomatoes, onions, garlic, and saffron. The name might derive from the Spanish word for “operetta,” suggesting a symphony of flavors.

Then you have the Asian types including tom yum. This Thai soup is similar to stews and includes seafood like shrimp, fish, or mussels, with a base of lemongrass, galangal, kaffir lime leaves, chili, and fish sauce, yielding a mix of spicy, sour, and sweet. Sundubu Jjigae from Korea is this soft tofu stew that often includes seafood like shrimp or mussels. It’s known for its spicy, comforting qualities, typically using chili powder for heat.

The concept of a stew made from whatever the sea provides has been adapted to local tastes worldwide, from the Caribbean’s fish stews to Brazilian Moqueca, which adds coconut milk and dendê oil for a unique flavor. That’s the key: using what is available, put it in a pot, add your favorite other stuff and you are done!

So common is the seafood stew in history that one wonders how and why it came to be such a rarified thing in our diets, and why it is today associated only with fine dining. It’s actually the people’s food.

Do you know the hilarious story of how calamari became a favorite at restaurants? Fishermen have always had too much squid and no one particularly likes it. But one food entrepreneur figured out that if you slice and bread it, it looks like onion rings. The name was a problem so he looked around the world for squid in foreign tongues and came up with the exotic name calamari. Done!

So why don't most make such stews at home? I think this strange feature of our times traces to the squeamishness of several generations, dating back to the TV dinner and continuing through the ubiquity of hamburgers and pizzas. We regard our food to look like something that is not some random animal swimming out there in the ocean. Probably. It's why we say pork rather than pig and beef rather than cow—we don't like to think about the animal.

Well, all this processed stuff is ruining our health and our aesthetic sense too. To heck with it all. Maybe you too can find a fresh fishmonger in your town and load up on the oddities from the sea, throw them in a pot, and have a blast. I sure did and regret not having done this many years ago.

One more point about the expense: it's not as much as I would have expected. In any case, making it at home saves you probably 70 percent from what you would pay at a restaurant. And even now you can get a can of tomato sauce for under a dollar, so inflation seems not to have ruined everything.

As with all such articles, I'm sure to get a flurry of notes telling me, "Welcome to the club!" Many people have been doing this all their lives and for generations. Indeed and congratulations. The rest of us are only now catching up!

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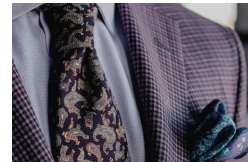


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