

Catch of the Day

By Carol Harvie Yamaguchi

Fish soup is a specialty in almost every culture of the world. Born out of necessity, this dish was improvised by hungry fishermen who would throw their leftover catch of poor quality or undersized fish into a pot of sea water, olive oil and vinegar which they would then quickly boil on board their boats and devour with biscuits or dried bread. This simple recipe varied according to the season and daily catch; sometimes vegetables, spices, or other seasonings like chile pepper, spicy sausage, or citrus were added according to what was on hand. Usually, the eating of this fisherman's soup followed a strict hierarchical order with the captain having the first choice of fish, followed by the engineer, the master fisherman, the net boy and then the cabin boy. Back on land, this rustic improvised meal was then adapted and refined to suit the tastes of the region.

Undoubtedly the most famous of all fish soups is the hearty Bouillabaisse originating in the French port of Marseille. A communal festive meal, the secret to this soup lies in its rich broth made from scorpion fish, vegetables, and fennel, and seasoned with saffron. Potatoes and white fish are then poached in this flavorful stock. Traditionally served as two courses, the soup is first enjoyed ladled over dried bread that has been spread with rouille; the second course includes the potatoes and portions of monkfish or rockfish, with a small amount of broth to keep the ingredients warm. Purists argue that authentic Bouillabaisse can only be made on the Mediterranean coast where scorpion fish are in abundance. This particular fish although ugly in appearance, has a distinctive flavour and a gelatinous texture when boiled. The other prime ingredient is the rouille made from creamy, garlicky mayonnaise.

Another classic fish soup with French origins is the ubiquitous Chowder. Beginning as a simple fisherman's stew in Brittany in the seventeenth century, it was taken to the eastern coastline of the United States and Canada by the settlers and fishermen. The cooking pot which the fishermen used to cook this stew was called a chaudiere, hence the name. Although originally a cream based soup made with salt pork, fish and biscuits; by the 1840's, the traditional ingredients of east coast chowder were cream, bacon, clams, chopped fish, potatoes, and butter. At the same time, the Italian and Portuguese immigrants who settled in New York began using a tomato base, and Manhattan Chowder was born. Nowadays, there are many variations including more health conscious stocks thickened with milk, soya milk, sour cream, or white beans: unless you are a total purist, chowder may contain whatever ingredients are in season or on hand.

Italian people are passionate about fish soup. In practically every region along the coast of Italy there is a delicious version of fish soup. There is even an organization on the Adriatic coast of Italy called the Accademia del Brodetto which aims to preserve the classic fish soup of that area. Brodetto is a lavish dish made with nine to thirteen types of fish and seafood with flavourings of garlic, onion, tomatoes, parsley, vinegar and oil.

Modifications include seasoning with chili pepper, saffron, or other assorted herbs and spices. Subtle nuances in flavor and aroma are created with ingredients unique to a particular town or season. Cioppino, a variation of brodetto, was originally a traditional Genoese fish stew that focused on the catch of the day; this versatile recipe was brought over to San Francisco in the 1930's by Italian immigrants. Nowadays, cioppino is a traditional specialty of California cooking made with tomatoes, potatoes, parsley, wine, spices, and an infinite variety of fish and shellfish.

Asian fish soups combine fascinating ingredients with an interactive dining experience. In both Chinese and Japanese cooking, there are delicious hot pot or fondue style fish soups. Shellfish and other types of fish are dipped and briefly cooked in a communal pot filled with chicken broth or a kelp and fish broth. This is accompanied by tofu and seasonal vegetables such as chrysanthemum leaves, shitake mushrooms, watercress or thinly sliced carrot. There is also a selection of dipping sauces flavoured with soya sauce, lemon, sake, and uso (Japanese citrus). At the end of the meal, noodles are thrown into this multilayered broth, or else rice can be added to make a delicious congee. Perhaps the most famous of this type of hot pot in Japan is Chankonabe, an essential element of the Sumo Wrestlers' diet.

Every culture seems to have its own indigenous version of fish soup with modifications of seasoning, texture, aroma, thickening and choice of seafood. Portuguese Caldeirada is fish stew seasoned with coriander, all-spice, and saffron. Hungarian Fishermen's Soup focuses on carp as its main ingredient, while Thai Tom Yum seafood stew has that special spicy, salty and sour flavour unique to Thai cuisine. Greek Kakavia has squid or octopus as one of its many ingredients. Cullen Skink is a creamy chowder from Scotland made with smoked haddock, while Irish Fish Stew is thickened with white beans and cream. Fish soup is a fascinating challenge for the adventurous chef because the ingredients must be appropriate for the season and yet be combined in imaginative and impromptu ways.