

Fish stew: A fine fusion of East meets West

BY DAVID CAMPICHE

Digging into the chest-freezer, I stumbled upon a package of halibut. It was a winter day when the rain penetrated my consciousness. If I needed a bit of cheering up, the solution rested in my hand. Food and its preparation often brightens up the spirit.

As the fish defrosted, I prepared the base for a fish stew. Stock is always of the utmost importance, and I simmered one on the burner, on very low heat with leftover vegetables and Thai fish sauce with just a dab of curry paste. Any leftover bits of the fish, head or backbone, adds significantly to the taste. If you fillet a whole fish, the opportunity is optimal.

While I worked, I remembered hitchhiking across France with deep sense of adventure. The year was 1968 and my destination was the sleepy village of Arles. We remember this hamlet in Provence from the sad story of Vincent Van Gogh and his debilitating bout with depression. To this day, his paintings inspire me and the world. That day was hot and the rides had gone poorly. Finally, in the city as the night skies descended in an illuminating soft-pink veil, I

found a small cafe and was greeted warmly and then offered a specialty of the city, Arles' famous seafood stew.

Years later, I offer a variation on that divine bowl of fish stew. Holding back the cream, I substituted coconut milk with a dab of curry paste added to the stock. The preparation quickly sidled into a fusion, east meets west. The most important ingredient — other than a lovely fillet of fish — was the fennel bulb and orange rind. The marriage is exhilarating. That repast remains a happy memory that contributed to my love of fine simple food.

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons garlic
- 2 tablespoons each of butter and virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons of minced garlic
- 1 tablespoons of minced ginger
- ½ medium onion, diced
- 1/2 fennel bulb, finely diced
- Two stalks of finely sliced celery
- 1 green pepper, diced
- ½ medium zucchini, diced
- 11 ounce can diced tomatoes
- One large fish fillet, about 16 ounces
- Juice and rind of one orange, skin minced

- Three Kaffir leaves
- 4 cups fish stock, curry added and just a touch of red chili flakes
- 1 cup dry white wine or vermouth
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tablespoon fresh fennel leaf, fine chopped
- 2 tablespoons of fine chopped parsley
- 2 tablespoons of corn starch slurry added to a quarter cup of liquid for thickener
- 8 ounces of coconut cream

Preparation

Sauté the onion and garlic in the olive oil/butter mixture. Because this is a French/Asian fusion, experiment with some minced ginger. When translucent, add the diced fennel root, orange rind, and then the vegetables. Stir fry for a few minutes and then add the tomatoes, wine and fish stock. Add dried chili flakes to taste (Half a teaspoon). Simmer gently for a half hour and then finish with the coconut cream, orange juice, Kaffir leaves, herbs and salt and pepper to taste. Thicken with corn starch and just before serving add the cubed fish.

Many seafoods can be substituted. For example, a few different fishes or crab meat.



Arles fish stew recipe from David Campiche.

Remember, the seafood just needs to be gently poached, a very soft boil. Lean protein seizes up quickly and gets tough. One simple variation is to throw back to the French and substitute heavy cream for the coconut milk. Hold the curry and ginger. But the nice thing about this fusion is that it is lower in fat and agreeable to those with an intolerance for dairy products. A perfect entrée for a dinner party.

Someday, I will hopefully travel with my wife back to Arles and sample the specialty of the house: fish stew. Until then, let's enjoy the bounty of the Columbia-Pacific, and remember how lucky we are, living where we do, and among friends.

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