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feeding people

Carolyn Kauser-Abbott

Bouillabaisse

From humble beginnings to La Chartre de la Bouillabaisse Marseillaise

Bouillabaisse is a bit of an enigma. Is it a stew, or a soup? Is it a noble dish or peasant food? Was it invented by the Greeks, who once inhabited the area that is now Marseille, or by hungry French fishermen?

What we do know is that bouillabaisse is an iconic dish long associated with the French port city of Marseille.

Originally, local fishermen made use of unwanted fish parts and cuts of poor quality that they couldn't sell to create a modest soup. Using water from the Mediterranean and local spices, the fish were cooked and served in salty broth. By the 19th century, the local middle class had acquired a taste for this concoction. The recipe was adapted over time; ingredients such as tomatoes, fish stock, and saffron refined the dish and increased its cost.

Simple in concept, the word bouillabaisse comes from these two actions – the broth is boiled (*bouillir*), then the heat is lowered (*abaisser*). The high heat followed by simmering allows the spices to infuse the broth with flavour as it cooks the fish.

Many cultures have their own versions of fish chowder; the unique tastes of bouillabaisse are created from the region's abundant *herbes de Provence* and local rockfish. By the 1970s, this soup, once the staple of poor fishing families, could be found on menus throughout the city of Marseille and well beyond her borders. The level of quality and sophistication of preparation were as diverse as the establishments offering the soup on their menus.

In 1980, several Marseille-based restaurateurs determined that parameters should be established to maintain the superior reputation of this special dish. Chefs from nearly a dozen restaurants created *la Chartre de la Bouillabaisse Marseillaise* or the *Marseille Bouillabaisse Charter*. They acknowledged that cooking is not an exact science and that chefs should be given the liberty to play with ingredients and experiment in their kitchens. However, the goal was to maintain consistency and ensure that diners received top quality ingredients and service.






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The Marseille Bouillabaisse Charter is clear on several things: the fish should be fresh, never frozen; it must be local, captured from the Mediterranean; and it must include at least four varieties from the following list:

Scorpion fish: *an unattractive bottom-feeder with a ridged head and sharp spines. Some varieties can be venomous.*

White scorpion fish: *a variation of the above.*

Red mullet: *rouget de roche is a goatfish that has been prized since antiquity. The Romans are believed to have reared this fish and traded it by weight for silver.*

Skate: *a slow-growing, cartilaginous fish that's a relative to stingrays and sharks.*

Conger eel: *the largest member of the eel family, congers can reach up to 3 m. in length.*

John Dory: *on a French menu, it's generally listed as St. Pierre (Saint Peter's fish). Olive green in colour, John Dory is recognizable by the long spines on its fins and a distinctive dark spot on its side.*

Restaurants will often suggest additional options such as spiny lobster (*cigale de mer*), a local crustacean. Tempting as they are, these supplements will most certainly add both to the cost of your meal and to the amount of bouillabaisse you consume.

The meal service for Marseille bouillabaisse is somewhat regulated by the charter. The fish, once cooked, must be first presented to diners at the table. Then, it must be filleted and boned within viewing distance. This ensures that you're getting what you ordered.

As is the case for many dishes in France, bouillabaisse has prescribed rituals. The first course is the broth, served in shallow bowls. Accompanying the broth are crusty rounds of bread (croutons) and *rouille* (a mayonnaise mixed with red pepper, which gives it a rusty colour). Some restaurants will also serve shredded cheese. It's tempting to fill up on this first course, but try to activate your willpower.

The second course is the fish that has been prepared for you. The four or more varieties are served together with the remaining broth. Restaurant serving staff will continue refilling your bowl until the fish is gone or you indicate that you're finished. If your table is brave enough – or in our case crazy enough – to order the supplemental *homard* (lobster), this will come as your third course, also served in broth. When you're finished, you might find it necessary to take a long siesta after enjoying *la vraie bouillabaisse Marseillaise*.

Signature restaurants in Marseille are careful to maintain these exacting standards and proudly display an emblem to indicate that they are establishments that follow the charter.

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Bouillabaisse is a gourmet experience that shouldn't be missed. Aside from its delicious flavours, the best part about bouillabaisse is that it's quick to prepare. Ghyslaine Martin-Castellino, a chef based in the town of Salon-de-Provence not far from Marseille, gave me a lesson one evening. Including our trip to the fish merchant, the meal took just two hours to prepare. The following is her recipe.

La Bouillabaisse

This recipe may seem a bit complex, but if you follow the steps you'll discover that it's actually quite straightforward. There are, in reality, only three parts to the recipe – preparing the broth, cooking the fish and creating the rouille. Tell your fishmonger that you want to make bouillabaisse so he/she can help you with selecting the fish. You need a variety of fresh ocean fish to get the best results.

This
recipe
is on our
website



photo by Carolynne Kauser-Abbott

Prep Time: 1 hour
Cooking Time: 1 hour
Servings: 10-12 large soup bowls

Ingredients: Fish Course

2 baguettes

1 lb. assorted raw crustaceans (small crabs, shrimp, clams), in their shells

8-10 potatoes (russet or similar variety)

4 T. olive oil

2 onions, chopped

6 garlic cloves, crushed

2 T. parsley, chopped

1 12-oz. can diced tomatoes

4 bay leaves

6-10 fennel stems, the upper part of a bulb

salt and pepper to taste

2-3 t. chile pepper flakes

4 t. tomato paste

6-7 lb. assorted saltwater fish – aim for at least 2-3 whole fish (scaled and cleaned) and a few fillets (see note below about fish)

2 t. saffron

Ingredients: Soup Broth

4-1/2 lb. rockfish, small and whole (see note below about fish)

1 potato (russet or similar variety)

4 T. olive oil

1 onion, chopped

1 garlic clove, crushed

1 T. parsley, chopped

1 T. tomato paste

3 fennel stems, the upper part of a bulb

1 bay leaf

13 c. water

salt and pepper, to taste

Ingredients: La Rouille

1 egg yolk

1 t. chile pepper flakes

1/2 of the potato cooked in the soup broth, reserved

2 c. olive or grape seed oil

2 T. soup broth

salt and pepper, to taste

Prepare the fish:

Cut the baguette into 1/2-inch slices and place on a baking sheet. Lightly grill both sides under the broiler. Put the toasts in a serving dish and reserve. Clean the crustaceans, but don't remove their shells. Peel and cut the potatoes into 3/4-inch rounds, cover with cold water and reserve.

In a large stockpot, heat 4 T. of olive oil on medium heat and add the chopped onion. Allow the onion to soften slightly, then add the crushed garlic, chopped parsley, canned tomatoes, bay leaves, fennel stems and assorted crustaceans. Stir until the crustaceans turn pink.

Generously add salt and pepper. Add 2-3 t. chile pepper flakes and 4 t. of tomato paste. Allow the ingredients to cook for a few minutes then remove the pot from the heat.

Strain and discard the water from the potatoes. Place the potato rounds in a layer on top of the crustaceans and spices.

One at a time, place each of the whole fish and filets on top of the potatoes according to thickness and the time required for each one to cook. The thinnest fish and filets, which will cook the fastest, should be near the top. Sprinkle the ingredients with saffron. Cover the pot and set it aside while you prepare the broth.

Prepare the soup broth:

Rinse the small rockfish. Peel the potato and cut it in half. In a large stockpot, heat 4 T. of olive oil on medium heat and add the chopped onion. Allow the onion to soften slightly and add the crushed garlic, chopped parsley and the rockfish.

Stir until the fish begins to cook, then add 1 T. tomato paste, 1 c. water, fennel stems and bay leaf. Once the fish start to soften and fall apart, add 12 c. of water and the potato. Generously salt the broth and bring it to a boil. Cook the broth on medium for about 20 minutes.

Retrieve the potato and reserve it for la rouille. Using a fine-mesh strainer, strain the broth into a large bowl. One batch at a time, spoon the fish bits and spices into the strainer, and crush them with a wooden spoon to squeeze out the liquid and capture their intense flavours for the broth. Discard the fish and spices in the strainer.

Prepare la rouille:

Put the egg yolk in a bowl, with the chile pepper flakes, 1/2 of the reserved cooked potato, and some salt. Crush the potato and mix it well with the egg until it's relatively smooth.

Whisk in the 2 c. of oil slowly, adding as you whisk vigorously in one direction, about 10 minutes, until you create a mayonnaise consistency.

Add 2 T. of the soup broth to the mayonnaise, whisk until mixed, then put the rouille into a serving dish.

Final preparation of the fish:

Twenty minutes before you are ready to eat, pour the strained broth over the fish that were set aside earlier. On high heat, bring the broth to a full boil for 10-12 minutes. Lower the heat and cook the soup for about 5-7 minutes longer.

Presentation:

On a large serving platter, arrange the fish and crustaceans. Serve the broth in a soup terrine. Put the potato rounds in a separate dish. Your guests can enjoy the meal as they please, adding:

- broth and croutons with rouille
- broth and potatoes
- broth and fish
- or everything at once

Note about fish: since traditional bouillabaisse fish are not readily available here, Blu's and Boyd's fishmongers suggest for the broth – pacific rock cod and fish parts, like heads and bones from rock cod, halibut and salmon. For the fish course, these are all good options – halibut, basa, rock cod, snapper, Arctic char, mussels, scallops, Alaska crab, clams and shrimp.

Carolyn Kausser-Abbott writes a food and travel blog, gingerandnutmeg.com. Find her food and travel stories in Global Living, Avenue and on social media websites.