

## BOILING

### Le BOUILLABAISSSE - *Lou BOUI-ABAISSSE*

This iconic soup-and-fish fishermen's dish from Marseilles is one of the world's few recipes where real boiling is essential: nothing is more insulting than to serve a guest bouillabaisse with 'eyes' of olive oil because boiling has not emulsified it with the other liquid of the soup.

The following is my rough translation of J M Reboul's recipe from his late 19<sup>th</sup>-century book: *La Cuisiniere Provencale*. The recipes are pretty much down-home authentic and little messed around by professional kitchens. The origin of the name bouillabaisse is clearer in the second, Provençal name – it means 'boil-up' and then 'let it fall'.

'To serve a bouillabaisse made according to the Marsellaise way, there should be 7 or 8 guests. This recipe requires a good variety of fish, particularly rock fish, so it's best to make a big amount so you can use as many types of fish as possible.

'Some of these fish have a very special flavour, a perfume that gives the right effect. It's the combination of all these different tastes that leads to success. You can certainly make a passable bouillabaisse with three or four types of fish but it will never be more than a passable bouillabaisse.

'First assemble the fish and crustaceans, for instance: big prawns or scampi, rascasse (*perhaps the single most important and surprisingly available in Australasia as red scorpion fish*) gurnard, weaver, roucaou, john dory, monkfish, conger eel, whiting, bass etc, and then clean and scale them. Cut them into slices and divide between two plates: on one put the firm fleshed ingredients, on the other put the remainders such as the bass, roucaou, john dory, whiting.

'Put into a large casserole: 3 minced onions, (*these will have been small rather than large*) 4 garlic cloves, chopped, 2 peeled tomatoes, deseeded and chopped (*a late 19<sup>th</sup> century addition which can be omitted*) 1 big branch of thyme, 1 big branch of fennel (*root fennel is a good substitute –at least half a large bulb, chopped*), parsley stalk, a bay leaf, orange peel (*he suggests all from a whole one but I'd use much less*)

'On to them put the firm fleshed fish and half a glass of olive oil. Shake a little to distribute the oil and then just cover with boiling water. Season with salt, pepper and saffron.

‘Bring to the boil as quickly as you can and let it boil for five minutes (it must boil not simmer). Add the remaining tender fish. Boil another 5 minutes: it’s done 10 minutes after you start cooking.

‘Take off the fire, strain the liquid over slices of bread at least 1.5cm thick arranged in a deep dish. Arrange the fish pieces symmetrically on another plate. Sprinkle everything with chopped parsley and serve at once.

‘Observe how quickly the cooking is done: it is one of the most essential points: this creates an amalgam of the water and the oil to give a perfectly thickened liquid. Otherwise, it separates and the oil swims on the surface, which is not very appetising.

‘For a richer bouillabaisse the heads and other trimmings of the fish can be first used to make a stock. It’s more expensive (you should buy extra rock fish for this which are put through a sieve when cooked, as for *soupe de poissons*) but it makes a much more savoury bouillabaisse.’

### **My/Your BOUILLABAISSE**

M. Reboul’s recipe is admirable, but there is every reason why you should improve even on that by doing what the fishermen originally did at sea, and that is to catch, cut up and preserve fish as they worked during the day: the fish would be put into the olive oil with the thyme, fennel, parsley, bay, orange etc and thus exchange and create flavour all day. By the end of the day the fish and the aromatics had all exchanged flavours wonderfully and thus the reason a quick boil up on the beach over a wood fire could give such excellent flavour.

My friend Raphael from Marseilles says his mother used to keep this same mixture of fish and aromatics in the refrigerator for a day at least before cooking bouillabaisse at home.

Note also that toasted bread with fiery, chilli-hot rouille in the soup is not authentic but is a recent introduction by Languedociennes who now generally cook and wait in Marseilles, encouraged by the dumb palates of know-nothing tourists: if rouille is served it at all, it is served with the fish and not with the soup and the correct peppers used to give colour, *piments d’Espagne*, have only the mildest of heat. Do you really think canny fishermen and their wives would choose aromatic saffron, the most expensive of flavourings, and then blast their palate with chilli so saffron’s unruliness couldn’t fully be appreciated?

There are many other bouillabaisse recipes in Provence, some without fish, one made with peas, and plenty using just one sort of fish – sardines for instance. By

following the following recipe to make a bouillabaisse to which you can add what you like, and by not even attempting to make an authentic recipe, you put yourself way above criticism. I used less onion because of that in the stock, and Raphael's family serves bouillabaisse over potatoes, the sort of thing which creates implacable divisions between the families of a *faubourg* of Marseilles.

### **How to do it:**

For six or so servings

About 1 kg mixed fish, (with or without shellfish and always go for odd numbers of each in total)

1 smallish onion, chopped finely or sliced very finely (optional when using stock)

4 garlic cloves, chopped

2 peeled, deseeded tomatoes, chopped (canned are by far the best choice)

1 sprig of thyme

1 or 2 large sprigs of fennel (or 100g minimum sweet fennel bulb, sliced)

plenty of chopped parsley stalk

1 or 2 fresh bay leaves, torn roughly and de-ribbed

Zest of half a small sweet orange

3 tablespoons good olive oil (not necessarily extra virgin)

Salt and pepper

2 really good pinches saffron threads, half a teaspoon at least

1.5 litres/2 ¾ pints fish stock, ideally boiling hot

Good quality bread, thickly sliced and grilled (ideally) or toasted.

If you have the time, let the onion, garlic, tomatoes, thyme or fennel, bay, orange zest, olive oil, parsley, salt, pepper and saffron sit together in the casserole at room temperature for an hour or more. Make up the rouille to the last stage and toast the bread before you start.

Add the fish stock to the casserole and boil five minutes – this extra stage makes it more likely the sauce will amalgamate. Add the firm fish and simmer for a few minutes until cooked: add the delicate fish and crustaceans and cook through. If you see eyes of olive oil, turn up the heat so the liquid boils again before you add the second lot of fish.

Serve the soup with or without bread: serve rouille with the fish. Don't forget the importance of a lavish strewing of parsley, a far more authentic flavour of Provence than garlic or tomato . . .

### **Authentic rouille for bouillabaisse**

Crush two or more cloves of garlic in a mortar with two Spanish peppers or some sweet red capsicum and a tiny touch of chilli/Tabasco. Mix in a little soaked and squeezed white bread of previous good quality, two spoons of richly flavoured olive oil and then, at the last moment, beat in enough hot bouillon of the bouillabaisse to make a nice creamy firm consistency. To cheat, add very finely chopped fresh garlic and the merest dash of Tabasco to a good mayonnaise.