

Carolina Shrimp Bisque

Time: About 45 minutes active time

Bisque is a beautiful word we associate with smoothness and perfection. It derives from the French *bisquit* and refers to an early thickening technique for bisques, that of bread or crackers. Today, of course, we associate bread-thickened soups with more rustic fare, and delicate bisques with rice. Ever since the time of Escoffier, bisques have been rice-thickened—a superior means, we think, of preserving their delicacy, the signature characteristic of this fine soup.

It is interesting to note that for his bisques Escoffier chose the best rice available in Europe at the time, Carolina Gold.

This bisque is based on a gorgeous recipe I (Kay) developed for *Cook's Illustrated Magazine* some years ago. The recipe offers a convenient, effective approach for extracting flavor from shrimp, doesn't take all day in the kitchen and it lets you think of bisque in a pleasant, dreamy way. For the version below, I was also able to offer what I regard as improvements to the original recipe, and one in particular is the addition of rice.

Our bisque brings Charleston new crop Carolina Gold rice together with the best of the lowcountry's fall season white shrimp. It has a luxuriantly silken swallow, a maddeningly beautiful hue and an enticing, subtle flavor layering. Serve it as a first course and it will carry the conversation for the rest of the meal.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a pair of kitchen shears, a large skillet (preferably nonstick), a food processor, a 5- to 6-quart Dutch oven, a chinois, and a ladle.

Ingredients

2 pounds 21-28 shell-on shrimp, fresh or thawed

2 tablespoons good olive oil

1/3 cup brandy or cognac

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 large shallots, minced (1/2 cup)

Cooking Notes

Winter is long and a fine warming bisque need not be put off by the end of shrimp season. We found exceptional individually quick frozen shrimp (IQF) sold in 2-pound bags at Browne Trading Company in Maine. It is available by post, at a moment's notice, to you anywhere in the U.S. In fact, everything Browne sells is exceptional. The bisque couldn't tell the shrimp had been frozen and, we're guessing, neither will you.

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You'll notice this recipe calls for a homemade fish stock. Yes, that's kind of a nuisance and yes, you could dump the comparable amount of bottled clam juice into the pot. (Have you tasted bottled clam juice lately?)

The chinois we recommend in a few recipes is a conical strainer with mesh as fine as a double layer of cheesecloth—without cheesecloth's messy, wet gauze bandage character. The chinois screens liquids you want to be clear as a consommé or smooth as a bisque.

Like bisque, tarragon, too, has known the sting of rebuke. When we first started cooking, dried tarragon showed up in everything from chicken salad to poached salmon. Sometimes it crossed the border from sauce béarnaise without

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1 carrot, finely chopped (1/4 cup)

1 rib celery, finely chopped (1/4 cup)

1 clove garlic, minced

2 tablespoons (1 ounce) tomato paste

2 ounces (about 1/3 cup) Anson Mills Carolina Gold Rice Flour

1 cup decent dry white wine

1 quart Aromatic Fish Stock, simmering

1 big sprig fresh French tarragon or, if it is unavailable, fresh chervil

1 cup heavy cream

1 tablespoon juice from a large, juicy lemon

2 tablespoons Sercial Madeira or dry sherry

Pinch cayenne pepper

Fine sea salt to taste

Directions

1. Weigh out 12 ounces of the shrimp. Peel and devein it, reserving the shells. Snip the peeled shrimp into 3 or 4 pieces each (depending on the size of each shrimp) with a pair of kitchen shears. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use. Dry the remaining shrimp and reserved shells with paper towels, then turn the shrimp into a bowl with the olive oil. Toss to coat.
2. Heat a 12-inch skillet—nonstick is good—over highheat for 3 minutes. Lay half the shell-on shrimp and shells in the skillet in a single layer; sear the shrimp until they blush deeply and their shells begin to color, about a minute. Turn the shrimp and sear the other side. Pour half the warm cognac or brandy over the shrimp and wave a lit match across the top of the skillet until the spirits ignite. Shake the pan to perfume the shrimp with brandy. Transfer the shrimp to a food processor bowl. Allow the skillet to come back to heat, then sear and flambé the remaining shell-on shrimp;

warning and splashed down in a pot of Bolognese. After a while everyone was sick of it and dried tarragon went away for good. Today, no one seems to know what to do with tarragon, even when it's fresh. And even *when* it's fresh, it is often not true French tarragon—a delicate, nuanced herb with a faint, haunting near licorice flavor—but a coarser Russian variety with longer leaves and a grassy, overbearing finish. Don't let the big Russian trounce your delicate bisque. If you can't find fresh French tarragon, and you probably can't unless you grow it yourself, use chervil. Or go with some nice fresh chives.

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turn it into the food processor bowl. Process the full batch of shrimp and shells until they're ground to a fine meal, 30 seconds.

3. Melt the butter in a 5- to 6-quart Dutch oven over medium heat until it foams. Add the shallots, carrots, celery, garlic, and tomato paste. Cover and cook, stirring frequently, until the vegetables are soft and fragrant, about 5 minutes. Uncover the pot and stir in the rice flour. Cook, stirring constantly, for 2 or 3 minutes. Add the wine and simmering fish stock, scraping the bottom of the Dutch oven with a wooden spoon to loosen any browned bits. Stir in the shrimp paste. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a simmer; reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer gently, stirring frequently, until the flavors meld, 20 to 30 minutes.

4. strain the bisque through a chinois into a bowl, pressing on the solid mass with the back of a ladle to extract all the flavor and liquid. Wash and dry the Dutch oven and pour the strained bisque back into it. Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Add the reserved peeled shrimp and the tarragon or chervil, and simmer very gently until the shrimp are firm, but tender, about a minute. Stir in the cream, lemon juice, and cayenne and simmer very briefly. Stir in the Madeira or sherry. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and serve bright hot.

Serves 6