

Keeping it wild:

Outdoor food and forays

'SCONNIE CHOWDAH? YOU BETCHA!

John Motoviloff

Life is a series of trade-offs. You have time or money. Live in the city or country; on the coasts or in the heartland. Sometimes, however, with a little luck and imagination, you can have both.

I was at a juncture like this several years ago, when I had a mean craving for the creamy East Coast fish chowder I grew up on. The problem? The closest chowder house was a thousand miles away. I could have bought a frozen block of cod or haddock, but that was cheating — a far cry from the buckets of flounder and porgies my brother and I caught along the New Jersey coast as kids.

My craving was made worse by the fact I had gone to college in Boston — Mecca for “chowdah” — where I would scrape together my meager earnings for a bowl of the real item whenever I could. To add insult to injury, my wife had grown up in the Chowdah Belt, near Cape Cod, which meant both of us had the craving.

But ‘Sconnies don’t cry in their beer. Generations have earned their keep sawing logs, hacking away in mines, tilling rocky soil and toiling in factories. As I sat and pondered a 5-gallon bucket full of ice-caught panfish, I resolved to take the matter into my own hands. It was time to make chowder.

The fish were glistening, fresh and beautiful! The crappies looked like dapper gentlemen with their flecked tweed sides. The perch were sunbursts, wriggling bright on a bed of snow. The bluegills were thick and marl-colored. Sharpening my fillet knife, I resolved to do them justice.

I began my chowder the way it’s been done for centuries — with good fish stock. I put the filleted carcasses, heads and all, into a kettle of water, threw in vegetable peelings and let the whole thing cook down. A good chowder is thick, so as the stock simmered, I sautéed chopped vegetables (celery, onion and potato) in butter and added a few tablespoons of flour. I strained a quart of the fish stock through a sieve, right into the pot, and let it simmer.

As carpenters need to test their framing work before tacking down the siding, so cooks need to check the broth before adding the main ingredient. It wasn’t quite there, so I put in salt and pepper to taste, added chopped parsley, a large bay leaf and a pint of heated whole milk.

My chowder, it appeared, was on the road to success. I had only two more steps. Adding fish was the easy one. Fish in chowder needs only a quick dunk; all the more so with panfish. I dropped in the fillets and watched them turn from translucent to flaky white.

The other step — getting my wife’s approval — was trickier and more nerve-wracking. I puttered, put a loaf of French bread in the oven. I made a green salad. I’d even bought a six-pack of Sam Adams for the occasion. I dipped a spoon into the thick broth — good body, smooth taste, hint of green herbs and just enough salt and pepper. I was ready.



KERRY MOTVILOFF

I called my wife, Kerry, in.

She leaned over and smelled, then tasted. All was silent. I held my breath. She nodded and made the pronouncement.

“Good,” she said. “Really good, for freshwater fish.”

Now this might seem like faint praise, but New Englanders are terrible chauvinists when it comes to food. Real fish and chips is made from haddock. Fried clams can only be cooked with their bellies on. Lobster is the be all and end all. Translation: this soup would never be, could never be, New England chowder. But it was ‘Scinnie chowder. And pretty darn good at that.

John Motoviloff is a hunter, fisher, forager and proud Wisconsin transplant. He also wrote “Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest” (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), from which this recipe is adapted.

'SCONNIE CHOWDER

- 2 pounds fish carcasses (which have been filleted) with heads left on**
- 2 quarts water**
- 2 tablespoons butter or bacon fat**
- 1 bunch green onions or one yellow onion, peeled and chopped**
- 2 stalks celery, chopped**
- 2 cups potatoes, peeled and chopped**
- Salt and pepper to taste**
- Green herb, chopped, such as fresh parsley (1 tablespoon) or dried thyme (½ teaspoon)**
- 1 bay leaf**
- 2 cups milk, heated but not boiled**
- 1 pound firm-fleshed fish fillets (panfish, bass, northern pike or walleye)**

- 1. Save potato peels, onion ends and celery trimmings.**
- 2. Heat 2 quarts of water in a stockpot; add vegetable peelings and fish carcasses. Cook until reduced by half.**
- 3. In a heavy kettle, heat the butter or bacon grease. Briefly sauté vegetables until onions wilt. Add flour and toast lightly.**
- 4. Pour fish stock through a strainer into the heavy kettle, stirring browned vegetables. Simmer until potatoes are just tender.**
- 5. Add salt and pepper to taste. Add green herbs and bay leaf.**
- 6. Heat milk. Mix into chowder.**
- 7. Add fish fillets and cook just until they begin to break.**
- 8. Turn off heat. Serve with crusty bread, green salad and Wisconsin beer.**

SOUP IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK