

THE FISHERMAN MAGAZINE

DRUNKEN BLACKFISH STEW

By Toby Lapinski

With cold fall weather comes hot blackfish action. Here's a great recipe to warm your bones after a long day on the water.

I first sampled the following recipe many, many years ago at an annual gathering of the anglers from the website, Striped-bass.com. We would have several get-togethers throughout the season to trade stories, meet other members of the website and eventually fish. There were gatherings or “Legs” in Rhode Island, at the Canal, on the Cape and on the North Shore of Massachusetts if I remember correctly, and while the fishing often left something to be desired, I always looked forward to getting together with a group of like-minded fishermen.

One year the Rhode Island/Connecticut Leg met up at King Cove Marina in Stonington, CT. A member of the site who went by the handle, “Crafty Angler” was on hand with some of his famous “Drunken Blackfish Stew.” Now I had never met Crafty (Chuck Vietry) in person before this day, but I knew him through the website and had heard of the legend of his famed stew. Crafty also owned a Newport, RI business, The Angler’s Art, which restored old fishing pictures from his collection. He would frame the prints, and I have one still hanging in my house to this day.

Now back to the blackfish stew. In speaking with Dennis Zambrotta, “This recipe originates from Col Edmund Noll, USMC (Retired) - it's his recipe but it was Chuck “Crafty Angler” Vietry who perfected the recipe.” As with a lot of how I cook, much of my recipes start out pretty straight-forward, but as I’ve made them a few times I adjust things here and there for taste and things slowly evolve into the most current concoction. What follows below is the original recipe as relayed by Dennis Zambrotta from Chuck Vietry. I have made some small adjustments to my current version, but I wanted to leave

the recipe in its original form. For example, I use 2 cans of cubed potatoes in place of the fresh ones, and I omit celery from the final recipe as that is one vegetable of which I can not acquire a taste.

The stew begins with a home-made fish stock. This is the traditional way to prepare the recipe and provides for a much better end result. If you do not have the time to make a stock from scratch, and you do not have any in reserve in your freezer, you can substitute clam juice. I like to make a large batch of stock when I have the time, and then I will vacuum-seal and freeze it in batches for future use.

FISH STOCK

Ingredients:

- Several fish racks (heads, tails, bones etc.)
- 2 – 3 celery stalks
- 2 - 3 carrots
- 1 medium onion, peeled and quartered
- A few sprigs fresh dill, tarragon, thyme or a mixture of herbs
- Salt, to taste
- Several whole peppercorns
- 1 cup white wine

How To Make It:

1. Remove the fish gills (they make the stock bitter), as much blood as possible and clean the slime off any skin still left intact.
2. Place the fish, celery, carrots, onion, herbs and some salt and peppercorns in a large saucepan.
3. Add the wine and fill with enough water to fully cover all ingredients. You might need to push the racks down as they will float. Turn on the stove, set to medium-high and bring the liquid to a simmer but do not let it fully boil. Lower the heat and simmer for at least 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. After 30-or-so minutes, remove the pot from the heat and let cool slightly to make handling safer.
4. Prepare a second pot large enough to hold all of the liquid by draping a cheese cloth over the top and securing with several large rubber bands. Remove all large chunks of fish, vegetables, etc. and strain through cheesecloth. Your stock is now complete and can either be used immediately or frozen for future use.

UNCLE CRAFTY'S DRUNKEN BLACKFISH STEW

Ingredients:

- ¼ c. butter
- 1 medium onion diced
- 2 medium potatoes diced
- ½ c. celery sliced and diced
- 2 cans cream of potato soup
- 2 or 3 cups fresh homemade fish stock or clam juice
- Couple of dashes of Worcestershire
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 to 2 pounds of fish (blackfish) - if you use clam juice add some other fish that will flake like flounder or sea bass
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. pepper
- Dry Vermouth

Recipe:

1. Cut the blackfish fillets into small cubes.
2. Sauté onions in butter. Add potatoes, celery and fish stock or clam juice and cook until potatoes are al dente before adding potato soup.
3. Add fish when broth is boiling and cook until fish is firm and white. Salt and pepper to taste.
4. Add vermouth (not to taste, you don't want to overwhelm) but up to a quarter cup... but add slowly until you know something is there but you're not sure what. Try to make sure that there's plenty of fish and potatoes. I've added mashed anchovy but, like the vermouth, just enough to know it's there.