

Chef's Corner: Sheepshead Stew Rodanthe-Style

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Sheepshead Fish Stew is a low-calorie, nutritious one-pot meal loaded with rich flavors and heart-healthy ingredients!

Waste not, want not continues to be my theme as I explore the ethical use of all edible morsels from our catch or harvest.

Sheepshead fish makes excellent table fare. It feeds on small mollusks and crustaceans, and its mild, sweet flavor reflects this gourmet diet!

The meat is a great source of protein and heart-healthy Omega 3 fatty acids. It is high in riboflavin, vitamin B6 nutrients, and is rich in niacin, magnesium, potassium, and selenium.

The fish used for this recipe were caught during the summer of 2019 on the Rodanthe Fishing Pier on Hatteras Island, NC. However, Sheepshead are abundant throughout Southeastern Virginia and the Carolinas.

Because of the Sheepshead's anatomy, a significant amount of meaty flesh typically remains on the carcass once the fillets are removed. This recipe is a great way to utilize the succulent meat from the scaled, cleaned, and filleted Sheepshead carcasses. The key word being FRESH!

The head, neck, and collar meat are wonderful, as are the morsels pulled from the ribs and rich, muscular fins.

Sheepies love barnacle-covered structures and pilings, so piers and bridges are excellent places to find these hard fighting fish. However, be sure to bring a lot of bait – typically fiddler crabs or sand fleas – because these fish are light biters and notorious bait stealers! Their human-like teeth make them great bait thieves, and with their characteristic black bar coloring, Sheepshead anglers have affectionately nicknamed it the “Convict Fish!”

When I target Convicts on the pier, I like to use a hand-tied triple dropper bottom rig with 30-pound fluorocarbon and 1/0 Live Bait J-hooks. I add a bank sinker with just enough weight to hold bottom.

The triple dropper allows me to cover more of the water column, and it gives me three strikes to set the hook in that bony mouth!

On this day, I was averaging one hook-up every 10-15 bites, so I went through a lot of sand fleas to put enough Sheepies in the cooler for dinner!

I broiled the fresh fillets for dinner and reserved the cleaned, scaled carcasses for my fish stock.



Fish Stew and Oyster Crackers make for a Great OBX Lunch!



Sheepshead teeth are great for scraping barnacles off structured and crushing small mollusks and crustaceans.

Rodanthe-Style Sheepshead Fish Stew

Pictured at right are a pair of Rodanthe Sheepshead that made their way into this recipe!

Ingredients:

Fish Stock for the Stew:

3 Sheepshead carcasses (scaled & cleaned with fillets removed)
6-10 garlic cloves, crushed to release oils
3-5 bay leaves
1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns
Vegetable trimmings and ends (onion, peppers, celery, carrots, etc.)
Enough water to cover all ingredients in a large stock pot

Stew Ingredients:

Sheepshead meat pulled from bones (I also had some leftover meat from broiled Sheepies that I used)

NOTE: Another alternative is to cube one or two fillets to add at the end if you want a more chunky, meaty stew

5-6 medium potatoes, diced
2-3 medium onions, chopped
4-6 celery stalks with leaves, chopped
3-4 carrots, diced
Large carton fresh tomatoes, finely chopped (cherry, Roma, Beefsteak, etc.)
1 cup peppers, chopped (medley of Poblano, Jalapeno, & Green Pepper)
Whole kernel corn, shaved fresh from the cob (optional)
1/2 cup ketchup
1/2 stick of butter
1/2 cup Corn Starch (more if needed...easier to add than take away!)

Spices:

1-1/2 tablespoon whole leaf thyme (or more to taste)
1 tablespoon leaf oregano
Sea salt to taste
Black pepper to taste

Variations: This recipe is not rigid by any means, and once you have strained the stock, there are many ways to play this based on your personal taste and what you have on hand. Other ingredients that will work include canned tomatoes, okra, green peas, minced clams, shrimp, mussels, etc. So, try my list of ingredients, but feel free to improvise at will!

Directions:

Any good fish recipe begins with immediately getting the fish on ice after the catch to preserve the freshness and firm-up the texture for the cleaning station. Then, proceed to scale the fish, one at a time, returning each to the ice before scaling the next to keep the fish cold.

Once all fish are scaled and rinsed, clean each fish by removing the gills and entrails. Return to the ice immediately after rinsing as you go. If you plan to grill, broil, or bake the fish whole, this is all that needs to be done. Sheepshead are excellent cooked whole and produce incredibly succulent fillets!



Author with a nice pair of Sheepshead caught on the Rodanthe Pier!



Succulent Sheepshead Fillet!

For this recipe, carefully remove each fillet, and since we are utilizing the carcasses, fillet around the rib- and belly-meats, which are excellent for the stock.

If you choose to remove the skin from the fillets, put the skins in the stock pot, too! Likewise, when removing pin-bones and trimming-out the fillets, put all these byproducts straight into the stockpot.

Below are the three fresh-caught and well-iced Sheepshead used for this recipe.



Cleaned, Scaled, & Ready to Fillet!



Fresh Sheepshead Fillets!



Sheepshead Carcasses for the Pot!

Next, place the fish stock ingredients in the stock pot and add enough water to cover all ingredients. Simmer just below the boil on low-medium heat until the ingredients have cooked down; then, strain the stock and set aside to cool and settle.

Allow the fish to cool; then, carefully pick all meat from the bones and set aside (we will add it to the pot at the end).



Sheepshead Carcasses in the pot!!



Gently Simmering Fish Stock Pot.



Strained Sheepshead to be picked!

While the stock is simmering, chop the onions and celery as you melt the butter in a large stew pot. Sauté the celery and onions as you continue processing the fresh corn, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, and peppers.



Dicing Vegetables for the Stew.



Fresh-chopped Cherry Tomatoes.



Sautéing the Onion and Celery.

Once the celery and onions cook down, add the fresh chopped tomatoes to the pot and continue sautéing on medium heat for 5-10 minutes, stirring to release the juices.

Add the spices and begin ladling the strained fish stock into the pot.

After bringing to a gentle boil, add the diced carrots and potatoes and cook for 7-10 minutes.

Add ketchup, shaved corn, and chopped peppers to the pot and cook for another 5-10 minutes.

Dissolve the corn starch in cold water, stirring with a fork or small whisk until the paste liquifies and all solids dissolve.

Gradually stir-in the corn starch solution to add texture to the stew and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Once the corn starch has been added, any oil from the butter should be absorbed into the stew. If oil still settles to the top, it's okay to add a little more cornstarch to get the desired texture.



Adding the chopped tomatoes!



Strained Fish Stock for the Stew!



Stirring the Fish Stock into the Pot.

Once the stew has thickened to the desired texture, stir-in the reserved Sheepshead meat, and simmer for an additional five minutes.

I had some extra meat on hand from leftover broiled Sheepshead, so I added that with the reserved meat from the carcasses.

Another alternative would have been to dice some of the fillets into ¼- or ½-inch chunks, which would be added just after stirring-in the corn starch mixture.

This would certainly make for a meatier stew, and the texture of the meat is such that it would retain its shape in the stew.

Either way, the finished product is sure to please, and it may be eaten by itself or with a classic grilled cheese sandwich for a heartier meal!

So, the next time you catch a mess of stocky Sheepshead, salvage those carcasses from the fillet table, and turn them into a delicious pot of Rodanthe-style fish stew!



The Result: One Fine Pot of Sheepshead Stew!



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