

A bamboo steamer basket is positioned in the upper right corner of the page. Below it, a silver spoon rests on a white ceramic saucer. In the lower right corner, a portion of a green ceramic dish with a scalloped edge is visible. The background is a light-colored wooden surface with a natural grain pattern.

# Steaming Seafood for Clear, Pure Flavors

**Whether it's clams, snapper, or salmon, seafood responds deliciously to quick, moist cooking over an aromatic broth**

BY ALISON BARSHAK

**A**s a kid, I thought steamed seafood was one of the best things in life. At our favorite restaurant, my family ate at newspaper-covered tables on which the waitress unceremoniously dumped huge platters of steamed crabs—the only item on the menu. We ate dozens of crabs, savoring the sweet flavor of just-caught seafood unmasked by heavy sauces.

Today, I'm the chef at a restaurant where white linen tablecloths take the place of newspaper and a full range of fresh, sweet seafood is the star of my menu. I've learned many ways to prepare seafood, but I still think steam has an unmatched capacity for bringing out the pure ocean flavor of fish and shellfish.

Steaming is a quick and easy way to produce a delicious meal in very little time. Whether you're cooking salmon in the steam of a herb-infused broth or steaming clams in white wine, you won't need to spend much time preparing the flavoring ingredients or cooking the fish. You don't even need to buy a steamer—it's easy to make one with standard kitchen equipment. The most difficult part of steaming

seafood is making sure what you're steaming is very fresh. Tired seafood has no place to hide in simple dishes; what you'll taste is what you bought.

## **IT'S JUST SEAFOOD PLUS STEAM PLUS FLAVOR**

At its most basic, steaming means putting food over very hot water that produces rising steam, which in turn cooks the food. While this method is elegant in its simplicity, I like to improve upon it by adding flavor.

**Wrapping fish with flavor.** When you scatter herbs directly on fish and enfold it in plastic or parchment, all the herbal flavor is captured in the wrapping, so it really penetrates the fish during steaming. For a dramatic table presentation, you can wrap the fish in banana leaves or cabbage leaves.

This method is especially good for steaming lean fish, such as halibut and flounder; the wrapping not

*A one-pot dish becomes a one-bowl meal. The salmon and couscous are steamed together over the broth. At serving time, the fish is arranged on a bed of couscous, and the broth is poured over all.*





**Wrap up all the flavor and seal it in with steam.** A spoonful of aromatic ingredients permeates the mild fish during cooking.

only traps flavor but protects the fish's delicate flesh as well. It's also great when you want to prepare a meal in advance. You can wrap the fish and keep it in the refrigerator until you're ready to steam it.

**Steaming over broth.** Steaming fish over herb-infused broths is a method that seems almost too good to be true. Combine vegetables and seasonings with water, bring it to a boil, and steam fish fillets over the water. Ten minutes later, you have a fillet that has absorbed the flavors of the broth, and a flavorful broth to serve with the fish. Both components of the dish are delicious, and they practically cooked themselves.

Fattier fish like salmon are good for this technique; the flavor of the fish's fat adds to the broth, but the fish retains enough fat to keep it tasty. The broth can be flavored with almost anything: lemongrass, fresh herbs, garlic, ginger, or diced aromatic vegetables. Onions and carrots are among my favorites.

White wine also makes a delicious broth for steaming. I can never get enough of clams steamed with white wine, garlic, and lemon, especially when I swirl in a little butter at the end.

#### **SIMPLE TECHNIQUE, SIMPLE EQUIPMENT**

Any pot or deep saucepan with a tight-fitting lid can become a steamer; just set a few inverted empty cans



**Bright citrus zest accents with flavor and color.** A simple topping of orange, garlic, and ginger is a fresh partner for halibut.

or molds and a cake rack or plate inside the pan to raise the fish above the cooking liquid. Electric steamers and fish poachers also work well, but my favorite tool is probably the bamboo steamer.

Bamboo steamers consist of two or three bamboo trays that sit over a wok or saucepan. The steaming liquid goes in the wok or pan, the trays go on top and are capped by a bamboo lid to keep in the steam. The bamboo steamer's stacking style lets you cook a lot of food in relatively little space. Don't stack the steamers more than three high, however, since steam loses its power as it rises.

If you don't have one, bamboo steamers are easy to find and buy (they're very inexpensive). They're also easy to clean, and they look good on the table.

#### **CHOOSE FRESH FISH OR DON'T STEAM IT**

The most important step in steaming fish is choosing good-quality seafood in the first place. In steamed fish, the focus is on the fish's own flavor, which makes it difficult to compensate for mediocre seafood.

All seafood should have a sweet ocean smell. Seafood should never smell fishy, but an absence of odor is as bad as a strong odor; this can mean the fish was washed with chemicals to remove odor.

Here's a rundown of some of my favorite candidates for seafood steaming:

**Best shellfish: mussels, clams, crabs, lobsters, shrimp, and scallops.** When steaming live shellfish, choose ones that are very active. Clams and mussels should be tightly closed; if open, they should shut quickly when touched. Crabs and lobsters should be lively.

If you're steaming scallops, use sea scallops; their large size makes for a better texture than bay scallops. If by some wonderful circumstance, however, you find Taylor Bay scallops (they're farm-raised and are

Photos: Brian Hagiwara



sold still in the shell), use them. Treat them like clams and mussels, and invite someone you love to dine with you; their flavor is extraordinary.

Shrimp steams very well. If you want to chill the shrimp before serving, steam them in their shells. Otherwise, peel and devein the shrimp before steaming. Ironically, frozen shrimp is often better than “fresh”; almost no shrimp sold commercially is truly fresh because most of it is flash-frozen on the boat the moment it’s caught. That’s why it may be better to buy still-frozen shrimp and defrost it at home. Avoid shrimp with dried white edges and plutches; it’s been freezer burned.

**Best fillets: salmon, cod, sole, halibut, flounder, grouper, catfish, perch, bluefish, and mackerel.** Pick fillets or steaks that are firm and shiny with good color. The meat should not look dried out or opaque. Remove the skin from fillets, since the texture of steamed skin isn’t appealing.

If you can buy very fresh whole fish, take advantage of it with steaming—sea bass, perch, and trout are especially good. Ask your fishmonger to gut and gill the fish for you. I like to bring the fish to the table whole and let guests pick around the skin and bones.

#### IS IT DONE?

Clams and mussels open their shells when done, but judging doneness in other types of seafood is a matter of guidelines, not obvious tests. The greatest mistake is overcooking, which leaves fish flaky and dry. Don’t fear undercooking; you can always cook it more. I think most fish tastes best when cooked medium rare: moist and still slightly translucent in the center.

**To test for doneness in whole fish,** use a knife to poke the flesh in the center behind the gills. Pull the meat aside to see if it’s still raw near the bones. If blood is still coming from flesh, cook a little longer.

**To test for doneness in fillets,** use your sense of touch and sight. The fish should feel firm, not hard or rubbery, and the flesh should just begin to yield to pressure. To be sure, slide a knife into the fillet and separate the flakes to look for rawness.

### Halibut with Scallions & Sesame Oil

This dish goes together in less than 20 minutes. If you can’t get halibut, any firm-fleshed white fish will do. *Serves four.*

- 2 Tbs. minced fresh ginger
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- 2 Tbs. thinly sliced scallions
- 2 Tbs. toasted sesame oil
- 2 tsp. minced orange zest
- 4 halibut fillets (about 4 oz. each), skin removed
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

In a small bowl, combine the ginger, garlic, scallions, sesame oil, and orange zest. Divide the mixture and pat evenly on the fish fillets. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Lay a fillet in the center of an 8-inch sheet of plastic. Fold the plastic to create a tight package. Repeat with the other fillets.

Steam the fillets over simmering water for about 12 to 14 min., depending on the thickness of the fillets. Unwrap the fillets and transfer to a serving plate, pouring any steaming juices from the plastic over the fish.

### Steamed Grouper with Sun-Dried Tomato Pesto

This recipe makes a little more pesto than you’ll need, but it keeps well and has many uses. Other pestos or other firm, white fish can be substituted. *Serves four.*

- ½ cup chopped rehydrated or oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained
- 1 large clove garlic, minced
- ⅓ cup (packed) basil leaves, picked, washed, and dried
- ⅓ cup (packed) flat-leaf parsley leaves
- 2 Tbs. grated Parmesan
- 3 Tbs. pine nuts, toasted
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ tsp. salt
- 4 grouper fillets (about 6 oz. each)

**For the pesto**—In a blender, combine the tomatoes, garlic, basil, parsley, Parmesan, pine nuts, olive oil, and pepper until the mixture becomes a rough purée.

Lay a fillet in the center of an 8-inch sheet of plastic wrap. Evenly spread about 1 Tbs. of the pesto on the fillet and fold the plastic over the fish to create a tight package. Repeat with the other fillets.

Steam the fillets over simmering water for about 12 to 14 min., depending on the thickness of the fillets. Unwrap the fillets and transfer to a serving plate, pouring any steaming juices from the plastic over the fish.

### Steamed Salmon with Saffron Vegetable Broth & Couscous

While this is a very simple recipe, the results are decidedly sophisticated. Serve in deep, broad bowls, with good bread to sop up the broth. *Serves four.*

#### FOR THE COUSCOUS:

- 1 cup regular (not instant) couscous
- ½ cup hot water
- ½ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 2 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 2 Tbs. olive oil

#### FOR THE BROTH:

- 1 small head fennel (about 8 oz.), cut in ¼-inch strips
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 4 lemon slices, each ¼ inch thick
- 1 medium tomato (about 6 oz.), peeled, seeded, and chopped

(Ingredient list continues)

*You can make your own steamer if you don’t have one. Here, upturned custard cups raise a plate above the water level.*



*This full-bodied pesto works like a sauce. Sun-dried tomatoes, basil, and garlic flavor the fish (here it’s grouper) and create lots of tasty juices.*



**Steamed clams make their own sauce.**

When you steam clams in white wine and seasonings, the clams' own salty liquid makes a delicious broth, especially when you enrich it with a little butter.

1 small onion (about 4 oz.), sliced into thin half-moons  
 1 small leek (about 4 oz.), white only, washed and julienned  
 2 ribs celery, diced  
 1 medium carrot, diced  
 ¼ tsp. saffron threads  
 2 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme leaves  
 1 tsp. salt  
 ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper  
 6 cups water  
 3 Tbs. olive oil  
 4 salmon fillets (about 4 oz. each), skin removed

**Prepare the couscous**—Pour the couscous in a medium bowl; pour the hot water over it and stir in the salt and pepper. Set the couscous aside for about 10 to 15 min. to absorb the water. Add the garlic, parsley, and olive oil; toss together with a fork. Set aside.

**Make the broth**—Combine the fennel, garlic, lemon slices, tomato, onion, leek, celery, carrot, saffron threads, thyme, salt, pepper, water, and olive oil in a large bowl. You'll use this liquid to steam the fish and couscous.

**Steam the couscous and salmon**—Line a steaming tray with cheesecloth and pour in the couscous. If space allows, arrange the salmon next to the couscous. If not, put the salmon in another steamer tray and stack it on top of the couscous. Pour the broth into the steamer pan and set it over high heat. When the broth comes to a boil, reduce the heat to medium high and set the steaming tray on top. Steam the salmon and couscous for about 10 min., or until the fish is slightly resilient and no longer translucent. Taste the broth and adjust seasonings.

To serve, portion the couscous into soup bowls. Lay a salmon fillet on top of each pile of couscous and pour the broth and vegetables over all.

### Steamed Clams with Garlic & Tomato

The broth mixes with the clams' liquor and becomes the essence of clam flavor. Finishing the broth with chopped tomato, flat-leaf parsley, butter, and cracked black pepper turns it into a great sauce. *Serves four as an appetizer.*

24 littleneck clams, scrubbed thoroughly to remove sand  
 1 cup dry white wine  
 Zest of 1 lemon  
 3 cloves garlic, chopped  
 1 small tomato, diced small  
 2 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley  
 3 Tbs. unsalted butter  
 Cracked black pepper to taste  
 4 lemon wedges

Put the clams, wine, zest, and garlic in a large sauté pan; bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium high and cover the pan; the liquid should still bubble vigorously. Steam until the clams open, 5 to 7 min.

Remove the pan from the heat and portion the clams into soup plates. Add the tomato, parsley, and butter to the pan, swirling gently until the butter melts; season with pepper. Pour the sauce into the plates. Serve immediately with a lemon wedge.

*Alison Barshak is the chef at Striped Bass, a restaurant in Philadelphia that serves nothing but seafood.* ♦



## Wine Choices

### Look to crisp whites and light reds as balanced partners for delicate seafood

If I had to pick just one wine for all four of these delicious recipes, I'd head straight for Sauvignon Blanc. Also dubbed Fumé Blanc, this refreshing, food-friendly white has flavors of citrus and herbs and a purse-pleasing price tag. Buena Vista, Taft Street, and Robert Pei make excellent examples. Consider a white Bordeaux (affordable and delicious ones abound) or a Sancerre, from

France's Loire Valley, both made from Sauvignon Blanc grapes.

For each dish individually, lots of options open up. The halibut can handle a wine with a touch of sweetness: try a Gewürztraminer or Riesling whose floral, tropical fruit flavors mesh well with Asian ingredients. If you can find it, try Shaoxing, a potent, sherry-like rice wine from China that's served warm in tiny cups; if not, Japanese

sake would be just as fine. Good-quality domestic sparklers (Gloria Ferrer, Domaine Carneros, and Piper-Sonoma) will pick up on the sesame oil, orange zest, and ginger and set a festive mood.

The steamed clams and the salmon need a dry white wine; again, the Sauvignon Blanc grape will bring out the herbs and lemon in both dishes. Or go with a light Chardonnay, like Fetzer Sundial, or

an Italian white like Verdicchio.

Sun-dried tomato pesto is bold enough to make lighter reds possible. Consider an Italian red that's low in tannin, such as Castello d'Albola Chianti or Montepulciano d'Abruzzo by Umani Ronchi. Another choice, though slightly fuller-bodied, is a Rhône red, like Guigal's Côtes du Rhône.

—*Rosina Tinari Wilson is a food and wine writer and teacher.*