

Boning, Stuffing, and Braising Trout

Make a classic mushroom stuffing and turn a delicious braising liquid into a light, buttery herb sauce

BY JAMES PETERSON



Patience makes a pretty garnish. Author Jim Peterson cuts vegetables into a julienne to add flavor to the court bouillon as well as color and texture to the finished dish (right). Serve the trout whole—head, tail, and all—for a dramatic main dish.



The first time I ate a fish cooked whole, I was about seven years old and on a camping trip with my parents. I still remember the taste of those fresh-caught trout fried up in bacon over the campfire. Since then, I've never forgotten the secret of cooking whole fish.

Comparing a fish fillet to a whole cooked fish is like comparing a boneless chicken breast to a roast chicken; compared to the former, the latter is bursting with savory juices and deep flavor. Some

fish are too large to cook whole, but many smaller fish (those about 4 pounds or less) can be cooked whole with marvelous results.

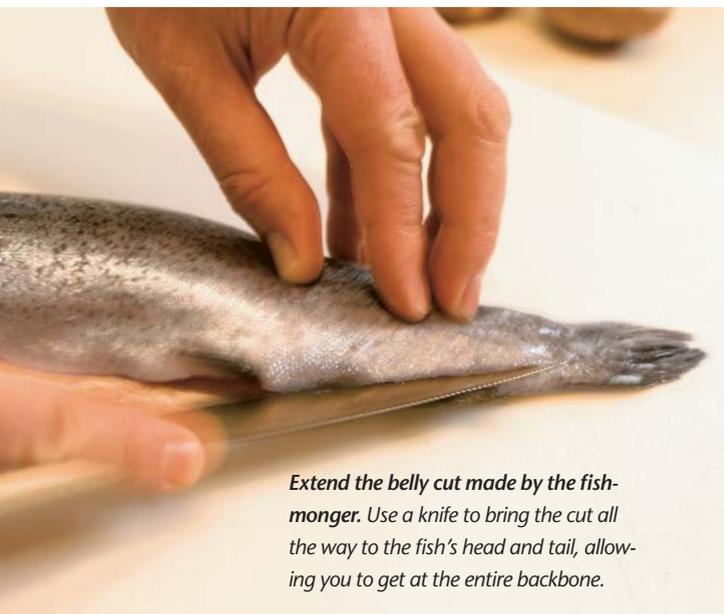
The stuffed trout I offer here is not only delicious, but its preparation also provides a lesson in classic French cooking techniques: boning a whole fish, braising, making a court bouillon, making a duxelles (a mixture of mushrooms and shallots), and mounting a sauce with butter. The finished dish is trout surrounded

by brightly colored vegetables and bathed in a light butter sauce that fills the air with the aroma of basil and parsley.

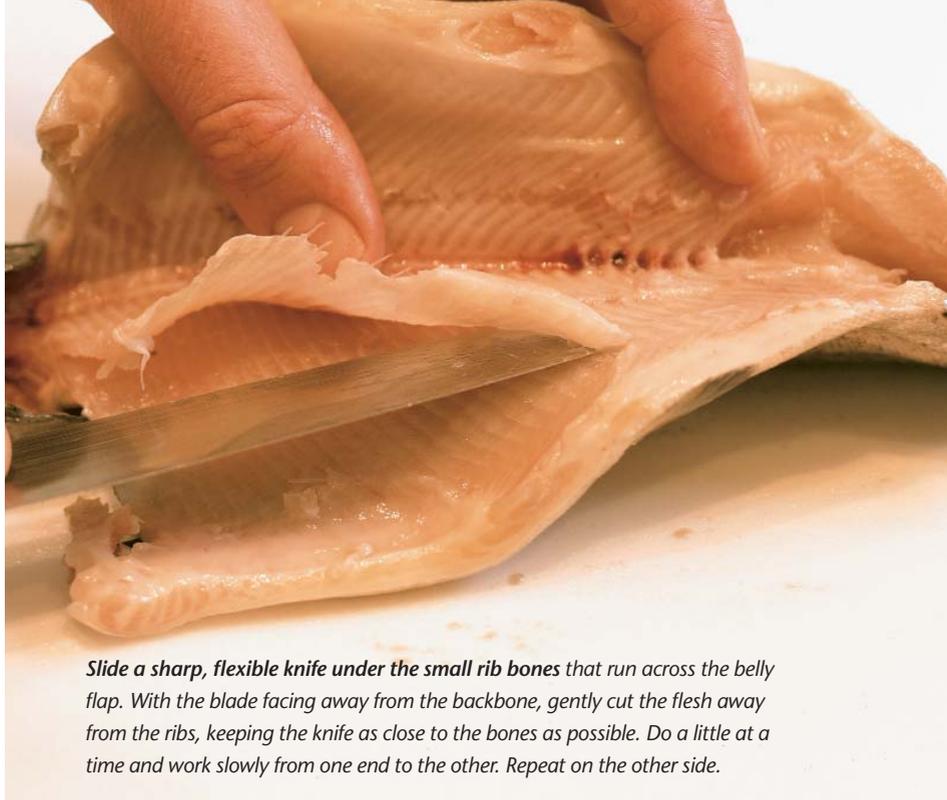
THE FISH'S BONES HAVE GOT TO GO

Most of us resist cooking a whole fish because we've either never cooked one or we fear encountering bones. There are a few ways around the problem of bones. You can carve the whole cooked fish at the table and deftly cut away the bones for your guests—a process that takes a bit

Boning the trout



Extend the belly cut made by the fishmonger. Use a knife to bring the cut all the way to the fish's head and tail, allowing you to get at the entire backbone.



Slide a sharp, flexible knife under the small rib bones that run across the belly flap. With the blade facing away from the backbone, gently cut the flesh away from the ribs, keeping the knife as close to the bones as possible. Do a little at a time and work slowly from one end to the other. Repeat on the other side.

of practice, not to mention showmanship—or you can bone the fish before cooking, as we're doing here.

There are two ways to bone whole round fish (flatfish like sole or flounder are another matter altogether). If you have an ungutted fish, as we did at that camp so many years ago, you may want to bone the fish through the back, being careful not to cut through the fish's belly from the inside, and to carefully pull out the innards from behind. In this way, you can leave the belly intact and the whole fish becomes a convenient pouch. But because most fish is sold already gutted, it's often impossible to bone through the back. Instead, you can bone through the belly as shown in the photos above. Whichever way you choose, remember to pull out the pin bones that run down the center of each fillet on both sides.

A PERFECT PLACE FOR STUFFING

Once you've boned a whole fish—and it's a lot easier than it sounds—you'll have a natural pocket for a simple stuffing, perhaps a sprinkling of herbs or the chopped, cooked mushrooms we're using here.

The mushroom mixture is a classic preparation called a duxelles, used for stuffing all sorts of birds and beasts as well as fish. You can make the duxelles (pronounced dook-SELL) with ordinary mushrooms or, for more flavor, with a mix of wild mushrooms.

There are many other stuffing possibilities, but for the delicately flavored trout, I avoid those that are overly rich or too strong in flavor. You want to consider the flavor of the fish when you prepare a stuffing. A baked mackerel can stand up to a stronger flavored stuffing, for example, because it's a strong-tasting fish.

Don't overstuff your fish. A couple of tablespoons of stuffing is usually plenty for a trout. Too much stuffing will burst out of the fish during cooking. You can also prevent bursting by not spreading the stuffing to the edges of the fish, leaving a little room for it to spread as it cooks.

Once you've stuffed the fish, you can cook it using the same methods you'd use for fish steaks or fillets: whole fish are

delicious grilled, roasted, poached, and, as shown here, braised.

BRAISING IS GENTLE AND MAKES A GOOD SAUCE BASE

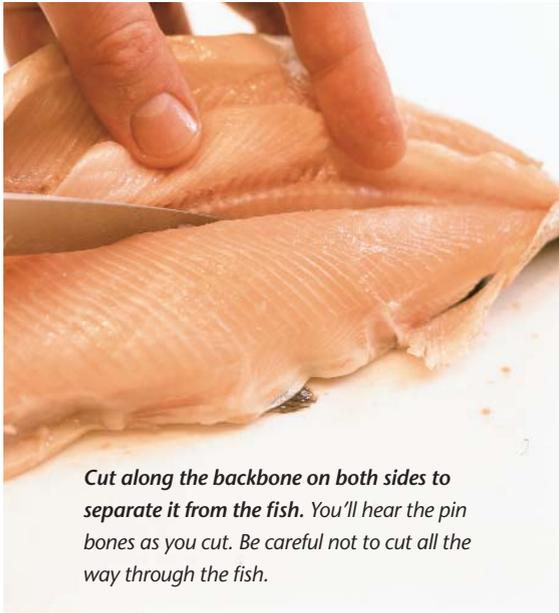
Braising is similar to poaching except that you use less liquid to cook the fish—usually just enough to come halfway up their sides. If I were poaching the fish, I'd secure the belly flaps together with toothpicks to keep the stuffing in, but because we are braising the fish in just a little liquid, you likely won't need to.

Braising also has the advantage of concentrating the fish's natural juices in a relatively small amount of cooking liquid. This liquid is transformed into a light sauce by adding freshly chopped herbs, diced tomatoes, or flavored butter.

Making the herb butter

Mix chopped herbs with softened butter to add great flavor to the sauce. Here parsley and basil leaves (½ cup of each) are minced and mixed into 8 tablespoons of butter with a wooden spoon until the herbs are thoroughly incorporated. You can also do this in a food processor, in which case there's no need to chop the herbs first. Cover the flavored butter with plastic wrap and refrigerate it until ready to use.





Cut along the backbone on both sides to separate it from the fish. You'll hear the pin bones as you cut. Be careful not to cut all the way through the fish.



Use scissors to snip the backbone where it joins the head and the tail. Gently pull the ribs and backbone from the fish.

A flavorful broth to braise the fish.

You can use a number of different liquids to braise your fish, but white wine, fish stock, tomato juice, and water are the most popular. Here we're using a type of broth called a court bouillon, made with vegetables, white wine, and water. In most traditional recipes for court bouillon, the vegetables are chopped and then strained out and discarded, but here we make the vegetable broth with prettily julienned vegetables that we save and serve in a bright tangle over and around the finished trout.

The right pan makes braising a breeze. To braise your whole fish, track down a sauté pan or a roasting pan just large enough to hold the fish in a single layer. (If your fish are too big, use more



Pull the pin bones out of the fillets with tweezers or pliers. Use your fingers to feel for the bones, which are easy to find. The bones run in a line about two-thirds of the way down the fish.



Cut out the remaining backbone with scissors. What's left can be easily trimmed after the fish has been cooked.

Stuffing the trout

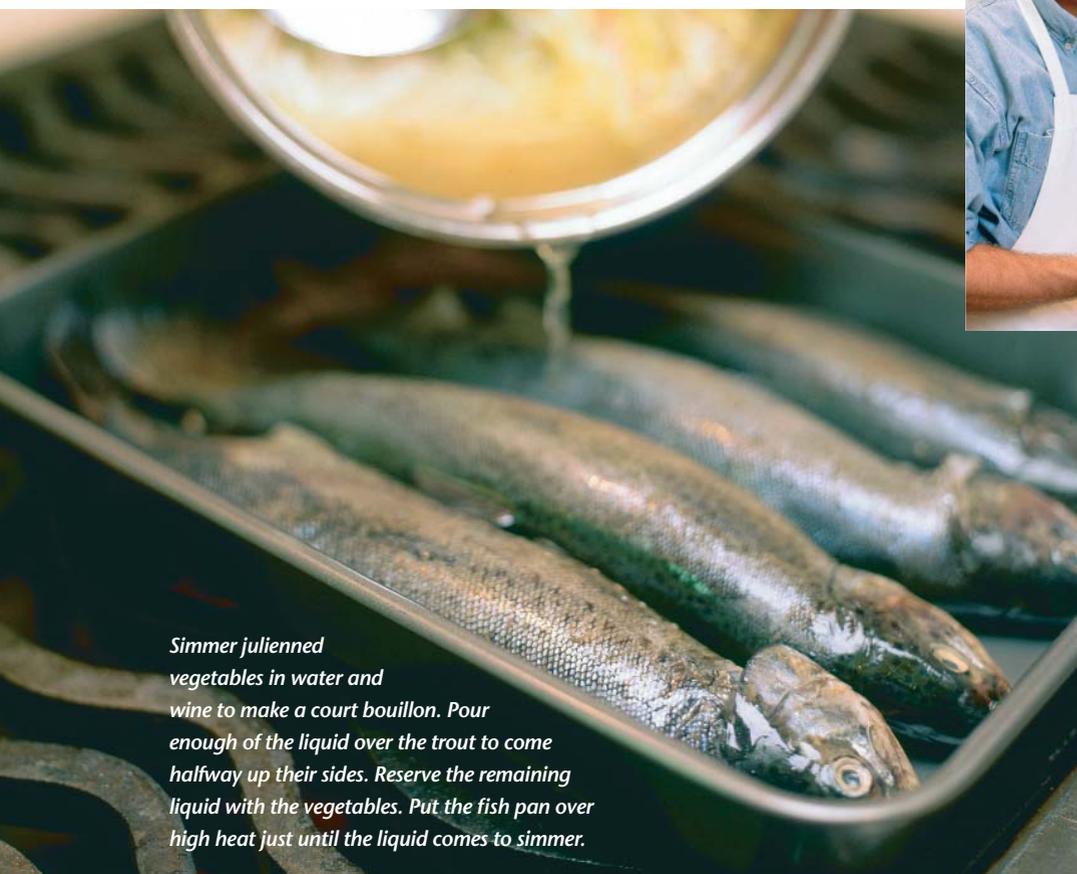
Cook chopped mushrooms with a chopped shallot in butter until dry. Add heavy cream, bring to a boil until it thickens, and season with salt and pepper.



Spread the stuffing evenly after seasoning the fish cavity with salt and pepper. Spread a few tablespoons along the inside middle of the trout, leaving room around the edges for the stuffing to expand during cooking.



Braising the trout



Simmer julienned vegetables in water and wine to make a court bouillon. Pour enough of the liquid over the trout to come halfway up their sides. Reserve the remaining liquid with the vegetables. Put the fish pan over high heat just until the liquid comes to simmer.

than one pan.) Don't use too large a pan for braising or you'll need too much liquid to braise the fish and it will then take you too long to reduce the braising liquid to make a sauce.

The fish begin cooking on the stove. When simmering the trout in the court bouillon, move the pan around on the burner so it heats evenly. After about 5 minutes on the stove, the fish are finished in the oven. Total cooking time is usually about 10 minutes per inch of thickness at the thickest part. When cooked, the flesh should look opaque.

Once the fish are cooked, you simply peel off their skin, remove any remaining bone in the fish's back, and keep the fish warm while you make the sauce.

Convert the liquid left in the pan into a flavorful sauce. Often the braising liquid must be boiled to reduce it and concentrate its flavor and body. On the other hand, if there's little liquid left, add water to it until you have about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup. Once you have the right amount of liquid, you can make a light sauce by stirring in a tablespoon of chopped fresh



Cover the pan loosely with foil and bake in a 400°F oven for 15 to 20 minutes. Check for doneness by making a small slit near the dorsal fin; the flesh should look opaque.

butter that's been mixed with fresh herbs, which I've found has a better, fuller flavor than simply adding the herbs and unflavored butter separately.

Sometimes I add more complex flavors to this dish with the addition of a morel butter and a lobster butter. A teaspoon or so of vinegar, such as white-wine or tarragon vinegar, added to the braising liquid, wakes up the sauce, giving it a little tweak of acidity.

I like to keep the sauce on the thin side, almost like a buttery broth, so that it has the satisfying feel of a butter sauce but doesn't overwhelm the fish. Because the final sauce is thin, use a deep soup plate to present the fish so the sauce won't run off the plate.

herbs, such as parsley, tarragon, chervil, or chives, and spooning the sauce over the trout.

You can make the sauce creamy by whisking in a little unsalted butter. You can take that a step further by using flavored butters in various combinations of flavors. In the dish here, we're adding

Preparing the finished dish

Transfer the cooked trout to a cutting board and peel off the skin. Pull the skin off before the fish cools and the skin begins to stick. Use a flexible knife to make a small cut near the fish's head and then pull the skin back from both sides.





Transfer the braising liquid to a saucepan and boil the liquid over high heat until there's about ¾ cup remaining (or add water to make ¾ cup). Whisk in the herb-flavored butter and the vinegar. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and remove from the heat.

You can serve the trout whole, or you can cut off the heads and tails and cut the bodies into two lozenge-shaped sections. Surround the fish with the sauce and top the plate with the julienned vegetables reserved from the court bouillon.

Boned Whole Trout with Mushroom Stuffing & Herb-Butter Sauce

Serves four as a main course; eight as an appetizer.

Four 12-oz. whole trout, boned
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Mushroom Stuffing (see recipe at right)

Open the boned fish skin side down. Salt and pepper the inside of the fish. Spread a quarter of the mushroom stuffing onto

Gently remove any remaining pieces of backbone, which should easily pull away from the flesh. Cover the fish loosely with foil to keep it warm.



each fish, leaving about ½ inch around the edges. Fold the fish back in half and put them in a roasting pan in which the fish fit snugly.

FOR THE MUSHROOM STUFFING:

1 Tbs. butter
1 medium shallot, chopped fine
½ lb. button mushrooms (or a mix of wild mushrooms), chopped
2 Tbs. heavy cream
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Melt the butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add the shallot and cook for about 5 min. Add the mushrooms. Turn the heat to high and cook, stirring until the liquid released by the mushrooms completely evaporates, about 10 min. Stir in the cream and boil the mixture until it thickens, about 1 min. Season with salt and pepper and let cool before stuffing the fish.

FOR THE COURT BOUILLON:

1 large or 2 medium carrots, julienned
Whites of 2 medium leeks, julienned
1 medium turnip, julienned
1 rib celery, julienned
1 cup water
¼ tsp. salt
½ cup dry white wine

Combine the vegetables with the water and salt in a medium pot. Don't worry if the water doesn't cover the vegetables; those not submerged will steam. Bring to a simmer over high heat, cover the pot, and turn the heat to low. Simmer for 10 min. Pour in the wine and simmer for another 10 min. Pour

most of the liquid into the pan over the fish for braising and reserve the vegetables and a bit of liquid in the pan to reheat later.

FOR THE HERB-BUTTER SAUCE:

½ cup tightly packed parsley leaves, minced
½ cup tightly packed basil leaves, minced
8 Tbs. unsalted butter, softened
Court bouillon from the fish pan
1 tsp. white-wine or tarragon vinegar; more to taste
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Mix the herbs and butter together until the herbs are completely incorporated. Chill the butter before using in the sauce.

Once the fish are cooked, remove them from their pan. Pour the remaining court bouillon into a medium saucepan. Reduce it over high heat or add water as necessary to make about ¾ cup of liquid. With the heat on medium, whisk in the herb-flavored butter until all lumps disappear. Add the vinegar, salt, and pepper.

James Peterson teaches French cooking around the country and is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking. He's the author of Sauces (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991), which was named Cookbook of the Year by the James Beard Foundation, and Splendid Soups (Bantam, 1993). His new book, Fish & Shellfish (Morrow, 1996), is in bookstores now. ♦

For an appetizer portion, remove the head and tail from the trout and cut the fish in half. Garnish with the sauce and the reserved vegetables.

