

A Fresh Look at Sautés

A French chef puts his contemporary spin on classic methods

BY JEAN-CHARLES BERRUET

Sautés can be very simple. You brown the main ingredient in fat, garnish with vegetables, and make the sauce in the same pan, using all that tasty residue in the bottom. Sautés play a major role in classic French cuisine, and some dishes have become elaborate affairs over the years. Take chicken Marengo, for example. It starts out with sautéed chicken, to which you add tomatoes, mushrooms, crayfish, and fried heart-shaped croutons; then you top the whole thing off with deep-fried eggs.

For a garnish, choose ingredients that accent the rest of the sauté. The author cuts sour pickles into fine julienne to use in his cod sauté; French cornichons have the best flavor and texture. The pickles and some capers are a good sharp foil for both the mild cod and the rich butter in the sauce.



But I prefer to cook simpler and lighter dishes, which I call *sautés à la minute*—instant sautés. I often use olive oil as the cooking fat for these sautés and take care to get the freshest ingredients; then I cook them so quickly that they keep their individual flavors.

My contemporary style of sauté is very fast and easy to make. Once my ingredients are prepared, the dish doesn't take more than a few minutes to cook and assemble. While the possible combinations of ingredients and seasonings are infinite, the basic method for a quick sauté is the same. I'm from Brittany in France, so I'm a fish-lover by birth. In my adopted home of Nantucket, Massachusetts, excellent fish are plentiful, so I often feature fish sautés on the menu of my restaurant.

Whatever ingredient you choose—chicken, pork, rabbit, fish—make sure you pick a cut that's suitable for quick cooking. For example, if veal is your choice, don't use *osso buco* (veal shanks), which are tough unless they're long-simmered. Choose something like veal scallop, which is tender with just minimal cooking.

Cut the main ingredient into even pieces so they'll all cook at the same rate. And think about how the shape of your ingredient will translate into a finished dish. My sautés are not like stews, in which all the ingredients are jumbled together in a sauce. With a sauté, I can arrange the food on my plate to make it look really appetizing.

THE FIRST STEP IS TO SEASON WELL

To prepare the sauté, I first season my main ingredient, which is fish in the two recipes I'm discussing in this article. The seasoning could be just salt and pepper, or it could be a marinade. I always use sea salt from Brittany, partly from loyalty to my home and partly because of its wonderful flavor. The salt is a grayish, coarse grain that's completely unrefined. It has a faint flavor of violets; I can really taste the difference between this salt and regular salt.

Photos: Martha Holmberg

In the monkfish recipe (see photo on p. 34), I marinate the fish for extra flavor. Monkfish absorbs flavors easily, so I use the best quality extra-virgin olive oil, freshly grated ginger, and fresh lemon juice. I don't marinate for more than an hour, however, because I don't want the acidic lemon juice to "cook" the fish.

I like to season with fresh herbs, too. Parsley, rosemary, and thyme are good choices for seasoning the fish before cooking because these herbs can stand up to the heat of the sauté pan. The more tender, fragile herbs, like tarragon, chervil, chives, and basil, are good additions to the finished sauce.

CORRECT SAUTÉING MAKES THIS DISH WORK

The next and perhaps most important step in a sauté is browning the main ingredients in a little fat—sautéing. The best pan to use is a sauté pan, called a *sauteuse* or *sautoir* in French. The pan should be wide enough to accommodate all the ingredients in one layer. Some sauté pans have straight sides, some have sloping; either style will do. The sides must be high enough to contain the amount of liquid I use to make the sauce, but low enough for the liquid to evaporate quickly and for me to get my spatula in the pan easily.

In my restaurant's kitchen, I have nothing but very heavy gauge copper pans with nickel lining. A few years ago, when the dollar was strong against



Go easy on the lemon juice or the marinade will be too acidic and the fish will "cook" in it. The fish shouldn't stay in the marinade more than an hour, either. Berruet inserts a fork in the lemon half to make squeezing easy and to help sieve out any seeds.

the French franc, I bought a whole containerful of wonderful copper from Dehillerin, the famous Parisian cookware store. Copper pans are great for browning because they conduct heat so quickly and evenly, and the nickel lining is good for dishes that contain wine or vinegar, because the acid doesn't attack the metal the way it would with aluminum. Aluminum also can give light-colored sauces a gray tinge. Whatever pan you use, be sure it's very heavy with a flat bottom for even heat distribution. Nonstick pans aren't great because you need the juices from the ingredients to leave a residue stuck in the pan so you can make a sauce. This doesn't always happen with nonstick pans.



Lively heat is critical for a good sauté. A hot pan and hot fat will keep the fish from sticking by forming a crust on the fish the instant it hits the pan. It's important to brown the fish well for good flavor in the fish and in the sauce.

I like to use olive oil or a mixture of olive oil and butter to brown the ingredients for my sautés. Butter on its own will burn, but blending butter and oil gives me a little butter flavor plus the ability to use really high heat, which is critical to a good sauté. If the pan and fat are not hot enough, the fish will stick to the pan. With really hot fat, a crust is formed the instant you put the fish in the pan, and this crust keeps it from sticking. You also want high heat for good caramelization, both on the fish itself and also in the little bits and pieces that stay in the pan. These caramelized bits will add flavor to the sauce. (See photo on p. 31.)

Brown the fish on both sides, turning delicate ones, like cod, carefully with a spatula so they don't fall apart. At this stage, cook the fish until it's almost, but not quite, done. It should still be a little underdone because it will keep cooking in its own heat while you make the sauce, and because you're going to reheat the fish in the sauce later.

A QUICK SAUCE MADE IN THE SAUTÉ PAN

When the fish is browned, take it out of the pan and keep it warm on a plate covered with foil. I use the warming shelf above my range at home.

Now you're ready to make the sauce. First degrease, another very important step because you don't want any extra fat in the dish, and definitely no

grease floating on the sauce. Pour off the excess butter or oil, but don't actually wipe out the pan because you risk wiping away the flavorful residue in the bottom.

The next step is called deglazing, which means adding liquid to the sauté pan and boiling to dissolve all the good cooked-on bits and to reduce and concentrate the liquid. Sometimes I'll cook the garnish ingredients, like the onions in the cod recipe (see photo on p. 34), in the pan before I add liquid and deglaze; sometimes I add liquid straight away.

The most common liquids to use in sautés are wine, stock, and spirits like cognac, calvados, or—in the monkfish recipe—rum. I also like to use cider, which is a traditional drink in Brittany. French cider is very dry, has about 8 percent alcohol and is slightly sparkling. It's not at all like American apple cider.

If I'm using spirits, I usually flame them first. This burns off the alcohol quickly and it also toasts the sugars in the spirit, giving a more mellow flavor. For alcohol like wine, flaming isn't necessary because the alcohol level is so low; in fact, it probably wouldn't even flame.

Flaming is a tricky and dangerous thing, and I recommend it only if you pay close attention to what you're doing. The vapors in hot alcohol are

The beginning of a beautiful sauce. At this point, the white wine and chicken stock are mixing with caramelized onions and delicious cooked-on juices from the sautéed fish to form a flavorful liquid that will be simmered until slightly thickened.



Meat glaze

Meat glaze, called *glace de viande* (GLASS duh vee-AHND) in French, is a concentrated, gelatinous paste made by slowly and carefully reducing brown veal stock to about one-tenth of its original volume. A glaze can be made from fish or poultry stock also, but meat glaze is the most common. It is mainly used in sauces, but a spoonful or two can add flavor and color to other dishes like stews or soups as well.

To make about two cups of meat glaze, simmer five quarts of good-quality brown veal stock in a large pot, skimming about every fifteen minutes for the first couple of hours, then occasionally after that. Wipe away any scorched residue on the inside of the pot to keep the glaze from acquiring a burnt flavor. When the stock has reduced by about half, transfer it into a smaller, clean pot and continue reducing until the liquid has a very syrupy consistency. Strain the glaze into a clean container to cool; it will become firm and rubbery. Store the glaze in the refrigerator for up to two months.

If you don't want to make your own meat glaze, you can buy it from Summerfield Farm, 10044 James Monroe Highway, Culpeper, VA 22701; 703/547-9600 (8 ounces is \$7.50;



32 ounces is \$20, plus shipping; minimum order is \$65). You can also buy a similar ingredient called demi-glaze (which has only half the concentration of a true glaze) from D'Artagnan, Inc. (1/800-DARTAGNAN). Theirs is a veal and duck stock (6.5 ounces is \$5, plus shipping) that was delicious in Chef Berruet's monkfish recipe. If you use demi-glaze, use twice the quantity called for in the recipe and reduce it a little longer.

—Martha Holmberg, Fine Cooking

Meat glaze adds deep flavor to the monkfish sauce. The meat glaze melts from a thick jelly into a rich amber liquid that will mix with rum, cream, and lemon juice. While meat glaze is time-consuming to make, a little goes a long way, and it lasts months in the refrigerator.

very volatile, so when they're ignited, the flames climb quickly and high. They die down instantly, too, but if you're not careful, you can singe your hair, clothes, or curtains with the first burst of flame. Always stand with your face well away from the pan. If you choose not to flame, just let the spirits simmer so the alcohol burns off.

During deglazing, scrape all the browned bits from the bottom of the sauté pan with a spoon. Let the liquid boil until it's reduced to a rich consistency—not thick, but concentrated in flavor and slightly syrupy in consistency. Then add the finishing touches. A little cream or butter for richness, a little lemon juice or capers for sharpness, fresh herbs for color and fragrance. Let these ingredients cook together for a few minutes, but if you've added butter, don't boil the sauce or the butter will separate and the sauce will be oily. Return the fish to the pan and let it simmer a few minutes in the sauce to complete the cooking and to blend all the flavors. Now you're ready to serve your *sauté à la minute*, full of fresh and lively flavor. I like to serve plain pasta, rice, or steamed potatoes with my sautés to soak up the delicious sauce.

SAUTÉ OF COD WITH CAPERS AND ONIONS

All the ingredients in this dish are easy to come by, so you don't have to wait for a special occasion to make it. Cod is one of my favorite types of fish, and it doesn't get the credit it deserves. Fresh, good-quality cod is sweet and mild, with firm white flakes. Use fillets or steaks for this recipe. I would serve this dish with a fruity sauvignon blanc. *Serves four.*

4 cod fillets or steaks, about 6 oz. each

Salt and pepper

1 Tbs. olive oil

6 Tbs. butter

2 large onions, sliced thin

1 cup dry white wine

¾ cup reduced-salt chicken stock

2 small sour pickles (cornichons), cut in julienne

1 Tbs. drained capers

1 Tbs. chopped fresh parsley

Rinse the cod and pat dry. Season with salt and pepper. (If you're using cod steaks, leave the skin and bone intact during cooking to help the fish hold together. After cooking, just peel off the skin and pull out the bone.)

Heat the olive oil and 2 Tbs. of the butter in a large sauté pan. When the fat is hot, add the fish and sauté over medium-high heat until light brown, about 3 min. on each side. Remove the fish with a spatula and keep it warm. Pour off all but 1 Tbs. of the fat and add the sliced onions. Cook the onions over medium heat, stirring frequently, until



When you know the basics of sautéing, making this cod dish is a snap. Onions, pickles, capers, and parsley come together in an unusual and satisfying garnish for the mild sautéed cod. The ingredients are easy to find, so you can make the dish anytime.

they're soft and caramelized, 8 to 10 min.

Add the wine and stock and a little salt and pepper. Boil, scraping the bottom of the pan, until the liquid is reduced by about half and has a slightly syrupy consistency.

Put the fish and any accumulated juices back in the pan and cook for another minute or so, basting the fish with the sauce.

Add the remaining 4 Tbs. of butter and shake the pan until the butter is blended into the sauce. Do not boil, or the butter will separate and the sauce will be oily. Add the julienned pickle, capers, and parsley.

Arrange the fish on warmed individual plates or on a platter and spoon the sauce over the fish.

SAUTÉ OF MONKFISH WITH GINGER AND RUM

I developed this dish after a visit to the West Indian island of Martinique, hence the rum. There they use cane syrup instead of honey. The meat glaze (see box on p. 33) in the sauce is strictly French, but I think it adds real depth of flavor. You can omit it, but the character of the dish will be different. Use a little more cream to make up the difference in volume of liquid. Monkfish is a very juicy fish, so I use a little flour and egg wash to help seal in the juices. My choice of wine for this dish would be a full-bodied, buttery California chardonnay or a rich French chardonnay like a Meursault. *Serves four.*

The flavors in this monkfish sauté are deep and delicious. The meat glaze and rum give it real depth, the ginger and lemon juice add spark, and the cream rounds off the whole thing. Chopped chives are a colorful touch.



1½ lb. monkfish, cut into 1-in. slices
6 Tbs. olive oil
2 Tbs. grated fresh ginger
1 Tbs. crushed black peppercorns
1 Tbs. chopped fresh parsley
Lemon juice
Flour
Egg wash (1 egg beaten with a few drops of olive oil and lemon juice, and salt and pepper)
3 Tbs. dark rum
6 Tbs. meat glaze
2 tsp. honey
½ cup heavy cream
1 Tbs. chopped fresh chives

Gently press the monkfish slices to flatten them slightly and pat dry. Mix half the olive oil with the ginger, peppercorns, parsley, and 2 tsp. lemon juice in a shallow dish. Arrange the monkfish in the dish, turning to coat with the marinade, and leave for 30 to 60 min. Remove the fish and wipe off all marinade.

Spread some flour on a piece of foil and put the egg wash in a shallow dish. Dip each piece of monkfish first in flour, shaking off the excess, then in egg wash. Do this immediately before you start to cook; the coating will become gooey if you let it sit more than a few minutes.

Heat the remaining 3 Tbs. olive oil in a sauté pan and when it's hot, add the monkfish. Sauté the fish over medium-high heat until light brown, about 3 min. per side, then remove the fish from the pan. Pour off the fat, return the fish to the pan, and add the rum. If you choose to flame the rum, stand back, dip a lighted match into the pan, and shake the pan until the flames subside. If you don't flame, just simmer about 30 seconds. Remove the fish again and keep it warm.

Add the meat glaze and bring it to a boil, scraping up the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Add the honey and cream and boil for a few minutes to reduce slightly. Add salt, pepper, and more lemon juice to taste (the sauce should have a nice acidic edge to it). If the fish needs reheating, put it back in the pan and heat for a few seconds in the sauce. Otherwise, arrange the fish on a warmed platter or on individual plates and pour the sauce over it. Sprinkle with chopped chives.



Fill pots on the stove. The author had a faucet plumbed into the top of his range so he doesn't have to lug pots of water from the kitchen sink.

Jean-Charles Berruet came to Nantucket from France 28 years ago, adopted it as his new homeland, and has never left. Since 1970, he has been chef and owner, with his wife Anne, of The Chanticleer, an award-winning restaurant in the historic village of Siasconset. ♦