

Consommé, Clear and Simple

Pure, intense flavor, with hardly a hint of fat

BY IRVING SHELBY SMITH

I'm not given to "raised-pinkie" pronouncements, but I just can't bring myself to call consommé a soup. The graceful poise of a good consommé has a calming effect on the mind. It's civilized. You may think that I'm being precious or fanciful, but serve one up sometime and you'll no doubt notice that it's all but impossible to race through a consommé. Jazzy soups, funky soups, and hearty country-style soups may be more comforting and folksy, but to me none is as compelling as consommé. After all, if we are what we eat, what better way to be than clear and concentrated?

Today's taste for vibrant flavors that are low in fat has led to a rediscovery of this French classic. More and more chefs are realizing that consommé is an exceptionally pure vehicle for aroma and flavor. And consommé's shimmering clarity makes for a stunning presentation. While consommé requires several steps, the process is straightforward and, once mastered, can lead to infinite improvisation with flavors and garnishes.

NO WIMPY STOCKS

A good consommé depends on a very rich stock, whether it be chicken, beef, seafood, or vegetable. Wimpy, watery stocks won't work. Make your stock



Liquid gold. Consommé has a purity of flavor and clarity of aspect like no other soup. And it's low in fat—perfect for today's taste for bold but lean food.

strong enough by using extra amounts of fresh meaty bones or aromatic vegetables. You can also reduce a finished stock by boiling gently to concentrate flavor. But don't cook it down too much or it will taste flat and dull. For a gallon of finished stock, about 45 minutes reducing is the limit. Starting out extra-strong is crucial because the very things that give stock flavor—all those tiny

particles that also make it murky—will be removed during the clarification. Skimming a stock regularly while it simmers will also produce a clearer, better-flavored stock.

FROM MURKY TO CRYSTALLINE

The transformation from cloudy stock to clear soup is quite amazing. It's carried out by the proteins in a mixture

Photo this page: Mary Ellen Bartley



These simple ingredients have amazing powers—egg whites, aromatic vegetables, and poultry, meat, or fish transform murky stock into an intense, amber consommé. The proteins in these ingredients coagulate during simmering and act like a superfine filter.

Not pretty, but effective. This chunky mass of egg whites, chopped beef, and vegetables is called a “raft.” As the ingredients coagulate in the hot stock, they float to the top to form a solid filter. Once they’re set, a hole is poked in the top so the liquid can bubble freely through the raft.



called a clearmeat—egg whites, some ground or chopped meat (except when making vegetarian consommé), and some aromatic vegetables and seasonings for flavor. When the stock and the clearmeat are heated, the particles in the stock coagulate with the egg white and meat protein. In effect, the stock is filtered. You can also add tomatoes to the clearmeat, as their acid will help the coagulation, but they’ll darken the consommé slightly.

I make clearmeat by first chopping up onions, celery, carrots, and the principal flavoring ingredient (seafood, chicken, beef, or mushrooms depending on what consommé I’m making). Then I mix this with egg whites, salt, and pepper and process it in a food processor until very fine. You can use egg whites alone, but I prefer to use other ingredients as well to boost and fine-tune the flavor of the finished consommé. Seasonings, such as salt and pepper, are added to the clearmeat because you don’t want to add them to a finished, perfectly clear consommé. The stock itself should also be well seasoned.

Mix everything gently—and then stand back. The clarification process begins by whisking about two cups of cool or warm stock into the clearmeat and then adding this mixture to the rest of the stock. If you’ve just made your

stock and it’s still hot, take extra care to whisk the stock, a little at a time, thoroughly with the clearmeat so the heat doesn’t coagulate the eggs too soon.

The next step is to bring the whole thing to a gentle simmer over high heat, stirring constantly and gently to prevent the clearmeat from settling at the bottom of the pot and burning—which will ruin everything. A good tool for this is a long-handled spatula or flat-ended spoon that will scrape the bottom of the pot. Don’t rush this stage—if the clearmeat cooks too quickly, it won’t take in all of the suspended particles and thoroughly clarify the stock.

When the stock reaches a boil, immediately turn down the heat as low as possible while still maintaining a gentle simmer. Stop stirring. The clearmeat will gradually coagulate and rise to the top as a crust, called the “raft.” The raft acts as a filter, trapping all the tiny suspended particles as they bubble up through it. Use a ladle or a large spoon to poke a hole in the raft, called a chimney, if a hole doesn’t form naturally. The raft will set up better if you baste it occasionally by carefully ladling some stock over it. Don’t let the stock boil, which will break up the raft and ruin the clarification of the consommé.

After the raft forms, let the stock simmer gently, undisturbed, for about

20 minutes, or until perfectly clear and richly flavored. If the consommé isn’t clear after 30 minutes of simmering, most likely the raft has broken up or has stuck to the bottom of the pot. In this case, strain the stock, discard the raft, and begin by making a fresh clearmeat mixture using the same stock.

Ladling and straining the filtered liquid. Now the trick is to retrieve the crystal-clear consommé without mixing up the raft. Just work slowly so you can control the liquid and solids separately. Line a sieve with a clean, damp, lint-free cloth. Ladle the consommé through the lined sieve. Don’t try to force the liquid through the sieve, which will only cloud the consommé. When you get down to the bottom of the pot, tilt it over the sieve to pour out all of the free-running consommé; use the ladle to keep the raft from falling out of the pot. Throw away the raft (or feed it to the dog) and set the consommé aside to cool. Consommé is high in protein and therefore vulnerable to bacterial growth, so cool it quickly; I use an ice-water bath.

Remove any traces of fat from the consommé by blotting the surface with paper towels. A well-made consommé will be fat-free, and it will keep for three days in the refrigerator or up to three months in the freezer.



This is no ordinary chicken noodle soup. Tiny ravioli, julienned vegetables, and herbs are the garnish for this chicken consommé, but you can use almost anything as a garnish as long as it won't cloud the soup.

Adding accents to consommé

Now that you've gone through all the fuss to make your limpid liquid, you'll probably want to choose a final seasoning and garnish to make it even more

intriguing and attractive. Almost any ingredient is possible as an accent to consommé, as long as you like the way the flavors, textures, and colors work with the pale, clear liquid.

I always cook garnishes ahead so their flavors stay distinct from the flavor of the consommé. And some things, like pastas or beans,

would absorb too much consommé during cooking. Use only nonfat methods to cook your garnishes (boiling, steaming) because any fat used in cooking will ruin the clarity of the consommé. Two exceptions to the cook-ahead rule are peeled, seeded, and diced tomatoes or sliced fresh truffle; both are soft

enough to go straight into the liquid. Here are some of my favorite additions:

- ◆ infuse the consommé by steeping with fresh herbs or spices: rosemary, tarragon, lemongrass, saffron
- ◆ flavor the broth *before* clarification with ground spices (adding them to the finished consommé would make it cloudy): Indian *garam masala*, Chinese five-spice
- ◆ vegetables cut in neat julienne, tiny dice, or *parisienne* (pea-sized balls made with a tiny melon baller), small asparagus tips, fresh peas, tiny mushrooms
- ◆ dried beans and legumes: black beans, black-eyed peas, navy beans, adzuki beans, lentils
- ◆ pastas, stuffed or unstuffed: tortellini, ravioli, wontons, bow-ties, orzo
- ◆ grains like pearl barley or wild rice
- ◆ delicate slices of meat, chicken, or fish, either the same type as the consommé or a different type for contrast
- ◆ small shellfish: shrimp, clams, scallops, mussels, lobster claws
- ◆ last minute accents: blanched strips of citrus zest, edible flowers, or a few drops of flavored oil.

BEEF STOCK

Yields about 3 quarts rich stock.

8 lb. meaty beef or veal bones, or a combination
2 onions, chopped coarse
2 carrots, chopped coarse
2 ribs celery, chopped coarse
5 qt. cold water
2 cloves garlic, peeled
1 tsp. black peppercorns
4 sprigs fresh thyme or 1 tsp. dried
1 bay leaf

Heat the oven to 450°F. Spread the bones in large shallow roasting pans and roast for 40 min. or until well-browned. Turn the bones, add the onions, carrots, and celery, and roast another 20 min. Transfer the roasted bones and vegetables to a pot that holds at least 10 qt. Pour off the fat from the roasting pans and deglaze them with 2 cups of the water. Add this to the pot, along with the remaining water, the garlic, peppercorns, and herbs.

Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to low, and simmer uncovered for 5 to 6 hours, skimming occasionally. Strain. Taste and reduce for flavor if necessary. Chill immediately in an ice bath or in the refrigerator. When chilled, skim off the fat.

CHICKEN STOCK

Yields about 3 quarts rich stock.

8 lb. chicken bones, trimmed of fat (necks and backs work well)
Ingredients (except beef and veal bones) from Beef Stock recipe above

Combine all the ingredients in a pot that holds at least 10 qt. Bring to a boil, lower the heat and simmer uncovered for 4 hours, skimming occasionally. Strain. Taste and reduce for flavor if necessary. Chill immediately in an ice bath or in the refrigerator. When chilled, skim off the fat.

Careful ladling for maximum clarity. After simmering until it's clear, ladle the consommé through a damp cloth as a final filter.



MUSHROOM STOCK

Yields about 3 quarts rich stock.

½ lb. dried wild mushrooms, such as shiitakes or porcini
Ingredients (except beef and veal bones) from Beef Stock recipe at left

Using a pot that holds at least 8 qt., follow the method for Chicken Stock (at left), cooking only about 1½ hours. There won't be any fat to skim.

SEAFOOD STOCK

Yields about 3 quarts rich stock.

3 qt. cold water
3 cups crisp, acidic dry white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc
5 lb. white fish bones, cut into 5-in. pieces (lobster, shrimp, or crab shells may be used, too, but avoid fatty fish such as salmon)
Ingredients (except beef and veal bones and water) from Beef Stock recipe at left

Follow the method for Chicken Stock (at left), cooking only 30 min.

CONSOMME

The process is the same no matter which consommé you're making—beef, chicken, mushroom, or seafood. And consommés aren't limited to these flavors, either. Experiment with other meats (lamb, venison), poultry (duck, turkey, or pheasant), and different types of vegetables, fish, and shellfish. Whatever ingredient you use, just be sure your stock is well balanced and full of flavor. *Yields about 2 quarts.*

FOR THE BASIC CLEARMEAT:

5 large egg whites
1 onion, chopped
1 carrot, chopped
1 rib celery, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

FOR BEEF CONSOMME:

¾ lb. lean beef, ground or chopped
2½ qt. rich Beef Stock (see recipe at left)

FOR CHICKEN CONSOMME:

¾ lb. boneless, skinless chicken breast, chopped
2½ qt. rich Chicken Stock (see recipe at left)

FOR MUSHROOM CONSOMME:

¾ oz. dried mushrooms, reconstituted
2½ qt. rich Mushroom Stock (see recipe at left)

FOR SEAFOOD CONSOMME:

¾ lb. scallops, shrimp, white-fleshed fish, or a combination
2½ qt. rich Seafood Stock (see recipe at left)

Combine the basic clearmeat ingredients with the beef, chicken, mushrooms, or seafood in a food processor. Process until very fine. Mix about 2 cups of the stock with the clearmeat and pour the mixture into the rest of the stock. Bring to a boil slowly, stirring constantly and gently. When the mixture begins to boil, immediately turn down the heat to a simmer and stop stirring. Allow the raft to form and make a chimney by poking a hole in the raft if an opening doesn't form on its own.

Simmer the consommé for 20 to 30 min., until perfectly clear. Remove from the heat. Gently ladle the consommé into a sieve lined with a clean, damp cloth set over a bowl. Allow to drain slowly through the sieve. Tilt the pot and drain off all the free-running consommé, using the ladle to hold back the raft. Remove any fat from the surface of the consommé by blotting the surface with paper towels. Cool quickly in an ice bath or in the refrigerator.

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Tilt the pot to get the last few drops. Pour off the free-running consommé. As you get to the last few drops, use your ladle to hold back the pieces of the raft.