

Fish Fast and Simple

Pan-steam for moist, tasty results in minutes

BY GARY A. COLEY



Ready in minutes. Pan-steamed recipes don't take long to prepare and cook. Flounder with bacon, red onion, and citrus over wilted spinach is a light dish with clean, refreshing flavors (recipe on p. 28).

Pan-steaming yields moist fish. The flounder fillet shown above is briefly sautéed, then covered and steamed off the heat for several minutes. Ingredients that don't need much cooking, like the citrus and red-onion slices, are added just before covering with the lid.

I've always loved seafood, but I rarely have the time or the energy to create elaborate dishes. To complicate matters, it's very easy to overcook fish. Cooked too long, fish turns dry or rubbery and loses its delicate flavor. I wanted a way to cook fish that would be quick and easy, that would yield moist results, and that would also allow me to use a range of ingredients for a variety of flavors. Drawing on my experience as a chef, I came up with a cooking method I have grown to love for many types of fish and shellfish—pan-steaming, a combination of two cooking techniques. I sauté the fish briefly in a very hot pan; then I turn off the heat, clap a lid on the

pan, and let the fish steam in its own juices for a few minutes. It comes out succulent and evenly cooked. Vegetables, herbs, and seasonings go in first or last, depending on how much time they need to cook.

The best things about the pan-steaming method are that it can be so easy, it makes overcooking almost impossible, and it allows me to produce a tasty meal for several people in half an hour or less.

TWO-STEP COOKING METHOD

Because the cooking time is so short, it's important to prepare all the ingredients before turning on the heat. I chop or slice vegetables to sizes that will cook



First, sauté ingredients that need longer cooking. Vegetables or seasonings that need cooking to soften them or to release their flavors go in first. Here, onions, tomatoes, olives, capers, and jalapeños are sautéed for Red Snapper Vera Cruz (recipe on p. 29).

quickly, mince garlic and herbs, and get all my seasonings within arm's reach, ready to add to the pan.

The equipment for pan-steaming is simple and basic—a heavy pan or skillet, eight to ten inches across, with a tight-fitting lid. A heavy pan is important because it must retain as much heat as possible to continue cooking the fish after the heat has been turned off. My cast-iron skillet works like a dream.

When I'm ready to cook, I set my skillet over high heat, add a few tablespoons of oil, and wait two minutes. The pan is hot enough when the surface of the oil starts to move, or when a drop of cold water bounces around as soon as it hits the oil. For scallops, I like to get the pan even hotter because I want to sear them to a golden brown, so I wait until the oil starts to smoke just a little.

Whether I'm cooking shellfish or fish, I sear it on one side, turn it, cover the pan, and turn off the heat. The fish continues to cook in the residual heat, leaving me with a succulent piece of flesh that isn't hard or dry. If your stove is electric, be sure to take the pan off the burner when you turn off the heat. Otherwise, the fish will overcook.

SELECTING FISH

Pan-steaming works for almost any kind of shellfish or fillet. I get best results with fish that isn't too large

or too thick (half an inch or less for fillets). I even cook fish steaks this way, but I sauté them longer to ensure they get done.

The farmers' market (we're blessed with several here in Atlanta) is my usual inspiration. I go to the seafood section and choose what looks good, always searching for the freshest product of the day. Smell the fish; it should smell fresh and not strong.

Shellfish—Shrimp, scallops, mussels, oysters, clams, and crayfish all cook very fast, in just several minutes in most cases. Always remove shellfish from their shells before pan-steaming. When peeling shrimp, though, I like to leave the shell on the last little tail section because I like the look. Most types of scallops, typically sold without their shells, are great for pan-steaming. Sea scallops are my favorite because they're more tender and usually have more flavor than bay scallops. Also, since sea scallops are large, I'm less liable to overcook them. If you use bay scallops, the larger ones are better than the tiny ones, which cook too fast and can get very dry.

Fillets—If no thicker than half an inch, fillets can cook as quickly as shellfish. Even thicker fillets take no more than ten minutes from the time I put them in the pan. Before cooking fillets, I check for bones by running my fingertips over the flesh. I remove any I find by pulling them out with a pair of tweezers (see the photo on p. 28).

Steaks—I opt for fish steaks that are about three-quarters to an inch thick. Thicker steaks need a little longer time over direct heat to ensure that they're cooked through to the center. For example, I cook soy-marinated mackerel steaks for five minutes before turning them. Then I cut off the heat and put the lid on for another five minutes.



Photos: Ruth Lively

Check fillets for bones. Some fish, like red snapper, hold tightly to a few of their bones. Heavy-duty tweezers or small needle-nose pliers are good for pulling out recalcitrant bones.

A piquant medley tops Red Snapper Vera Cruz. Olives, jalapeños, and capers add punch to simmered tomatoes and onions, while cinnamon, cloves, and bay leaf lend an aromatic Caribbean flavor.



ADDING OTHER INGREDIENTS

When I prepare seafood this way, I let my imagination run wild. The flavors and ingredients that can be added are as varied as the seafood itself. Some that I like to use are fresh herbs, garlic, olives, capers, tomatoes, mushrooms, and the juice and zest of lemons and limes.

When to add other ingredients depends on how much they need to be cooked. For example, I'll sauté sliced mushrooms or onions first, let them cook until they're almost done, then push them to the side and add my fish. Tomatoes can go in either before or after the fish, depending on whether I want to cook them down or just heat them. Sometimes I cook other ingredients first, and then remove them from the pan, either because they'd burn (like the bacon in the flounder recipe below) or because they release liquid that would interfere with the sautéing of the fish. For example, I make the tomato topping for the Red Snapper Vera Cruz first, and then empty it into a dish while I sear the fish. In most cases, though, sauces are simple: usually the pan juices reduced over high heat after the seafood has been removed.

Scallops with basil and tomatoes—I know it's the middle of winter, but I'd like to tell you about one of my favorite pan-steamed recipes, a simple combination of sea scallops, fresh basil, and vine-ripened tomatoes. You'll just have to wait until summer to try it.

To serve two people, use about twenty large sea

scallops, two medium tomatoes and eight to ten basil leaves. Peel the tomatoes, cut them in quarters, squeeze out the juice and seeds, then roughly chop the flesh. Cut the basil into strips. Rinse the scallops and season them with salt, white pepper, and a squeeze of lemon juice. When everything's ready, heat a few tablespoons of olive oil in your pan. When it's just barely smoking, pat the scallops dry and add them to the pan. They brown almost immediately. Turn them over and add the tomatoes and basil. Shake the pan to disperse the ingredients evenly and season with salt and pepper. Remove the pan from the heat, put the lid on, and let everything steam for four or five minutes. The whole process takes less than a quarter of an hour. Serve the scallops over pasta with a sprinkling of Parmesan.

FLOUNDER FILLETS WITH BACON, RED ONION, AND CITRUS OVER WILTED SPINACH

This dish is almost a complete meal. Serve it with small, boiled red potatoes, a salad, and good bread. A California sauvignon blanc with a fair amount of acidity, one that has pronounced herbal or grassy overtones, would hold up well to the citrus and onions. *Serves four.*

- 4 flounder fillets, 6 to 7 oz. each
- 2 oranges (or 12 to 16 segments)
- 2 grapefruit (or 12 to 16 segments)
- 8 slices lean bacon, diced into ¼-in. pieces
- ½ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. white pepper
- 1 large or 2 medium red onions, sliced as thin as possible
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh tarragon
- 1 to 1¼ lb. fresh spinach, washed and drained

Prepare the ingredients. Trim the edges of the flounder to remove any traces of skin. Prepare the citrus by cutting away the rind and pith, then cut individual segments away from the membrane. Put into a bowl and set aside. Sauté the bacon slowly in a heavy skillet until golden and crispy, stirring occasionally. Drain on paper towels and set aside. Reserve the bacon fat for cooking the fish and spinach later.

Cook the flounder. Using the same heavy skillet, bring 2 Tbs. of the bacon fat up to temperature over high heat. Lightly salt and pepper the fillets and place them in the hot skillet. Sear well on one side, about 1 min., and then turn the fish. Sprinkle the sliced onion around the fish. Add the fruit and its juice, the bacon, and the tarragon. Cover with a tight-fitting lid. Remove from the heat and let steam for 5 to 6 min., depending on the thickness of the fillet.

Wilt the spinach. Meanwhile, in another skillet heat 2 Tbs. reserved bacon fat over a medium-high setting. (If you run out of bacon fat, supplement with vegetable oil.) Once the fat is hot, add the spinach. Toss it with a spatula just until the spinach is warm and has begun to wilt.

Compose the servings. Arrange the spinach on warm plates. By this time the flounder should be done. Lay it on the spinach and place fruit segments and onions loosely over the fish. Spoon the bacon, the tarragon, and the pan juices over each portion.

RED SNAPPER VERA CRUZ

Serve this spicy dish alongside rice that's topped with fresh chopped herbs and butter. Grapefruit segments and avocado wedges on Bibb lettuce and a simple lime dressing make a refreshing salad. Bread or hot flour tortillas complete the meal. The fruitiness of a well-made dry gewürztraminer plays off the spiciness of this dish. *Serves four.*

4 red snapper fillets, 6 to 7 oz. each

Fresh lemon juice

Salt

6 Tbs. olive oil

2 medium yellow onions, sliced thin

2 cloves garlic, minced

8 plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and cut into strips

24 green olives, pitted and chopped rough

2 Tbs. capers

2 pickled jalapeños, seeded and sliced

1 to 2 Tbs. pickling juice from the jalapeños

1 tsp. dried thyme

1 tsp. dried marjoram

2 bay leaves

½ tsp. ground cinnamon

2 whole cloves

½ tsp. coarse black pepper

2 Tbs. chopped parsley, plus extra leaves for garnish

1 cup fish stock or canned clam juice

¼ cup olive oil

Prepare the fillets. Check the red snapper for bones and remove any with a pair of tweezers or needle-nose pliers. Sprinkle with lemon juice and salt, and set aside.

Make the sauce. In a large, heavy skillet, heat 6 Tbs. of oil. Sauté the onions until soft, 6 to 7 min., over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and cook 1 min. Add the tomatoes and simmer 4 to 5 min. Then add the olives, capers, jalapeños, pickling juice, herbs, spices, chopped parsley, and fish stock or clam juice. Simmer uncovered for 7 to 8 min. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and set aside in a warm place.

Cook the fillets. In the same pan, heat ¼ cup oil about 2 min., until it starts to shimmer. Sauté the snapper, skin side down, 2 min. and then turn over. Cover the fish with the tomato mixture. Bring to a simmer, cover tightly,

remove from the heat, and let steam for about 3 min. With a slotted spoon, arrange the fillets on warm plates and spoon the sauce over them. Garnish with parsley.

LEMON SHRIMP WITH MUSHROOMS

For this simple combination, the lemon juice and zest add a wonderful fresh taste, while the mushrooms contribute interesting texture. A fruity chardonnay with a lot of body would go well with the tang of the lemon and the sweetness of the shrimp. *Serves four.*

32 to 40 medium shrimp or 24 to 28 large shrimp

2 lemons

6 Tbs. olive oil

7 oz. crimini or regular white mushrooms, sliced

Salt and pepper

4 to 5 sprigs of parsley, chopped rough



Prepare the ingredients. Peel the shrimp except for the last remaining tail section. Remove the zest of half a lemon with a fine zester, or use a knife, and then cut the zest into fine julienne. Juice the lemons.

Cook the mushrooms and shrimp. In a large skillet set over medium-high heat, sauté the mushrooms in 4 Tbs. oil for about 1 min., until they begin to release their juices. Push to the sides of the pan. Add 2 Tbs. oil and bring it up to temperature. Add the shrimp and sauté about 1 min. on both sides. Season with salt and pepper. Add lemon zest and juice, and parsley. Cover tightly and remove from heat. Let steam about 6 min.

Shellfish lend themselves to simple preparation. Here, shrimp are dressed with lemon juice and zest, mushrooms, and herbs. Mussels, clams, or scallops would all make delicious substitutes for the shrimp.

Gary A. Coley trained at Dumas Père school for chefs in Glenview, Illinois, and apprenticed for three years at the Ritz-Carlton in Chicago. He later worked at Wicklein's and ran Cornelia's, both small Chicago restaurants. Coley now lives in Atlanta, where he is a private chef, preparing dinners for small parties in private homes. Wine recommendations are from Don Hepler, wine manager at Amity Wines & Spirit Co. in New Haven, Connecticut. ♦