



There's no arguing that *bouillabaisse* is Marseille's most emblematic dish. In fact, it's the first speciality food lovers are eager to sample when they visit the cosmopolitan port city. With a history that goes back to the 7th century, the richly filled soup has evolved from poor fisherman's fare to one of the most sophisticated classics of French cuisine. Today, you can expect to pay upwards of €50 for a properly prepared *bouillabaisse*.

A taste of history

But what exactly is a proper *bouillabaisse*? Perhaps it's best to start with the provenance of the dish. It is believed that the Ancient Greeks who founded Massalia (Marseille's ancient name) around 600 BC were already enjoying a similar fish soup. Originally made by fishermen with the day's catch and whatever vegetables they had to hand (usually onions and potatoes), the humble soup was named '*kakavia*' after the earthenware pot (*kakavi*) in which it was cooked. Only the smallest and least attractive fish were used as the best were reserved for sale at the market.

Not much changed throughout the ages. Upon returning to shore, fishermen who worked between Marseille and Toulon would sort out their

A different kettle OF FISH

From its origins as a humble soup, bouillabaisse has become a sophisticated classic that flies the flag for Marseille, writes **Paola Westbeek**



haul, keeping bony rockfish and shellfish for use in a hearty soup made with sea water and a variety of vegetables and aromatics. In fact, such soups were made all along the Mediterranean coast with variations in Italy (*cacciucco*), Spain (*zarzuela*) and Portugal (*caldeirada*) too.

The oldest recipe known dates to 1768 and was found in a notebook promoting healthy cooking. Interestingly, it included garlic, parsley, bay leaf, olive oil and large amounts of onions. When tomatoes became more readily available towards the end of the 18th century, they replaced some of the onions, adding more colour and taste to the soup.

In 1786, the recipe made its way to Paris, becoming one of the fish specialities at Les Trois Frères Provençaux, a swanky restaurant run by three chefs from Provence on Rue Sainte-Anne, not far from the bustling Palais-Royal. Soon, the city's finest connoisseurs had become enamoured with the soup and it was well on its way to evolving into the refined dish we know today.

By the early 19th century, restaurants in Marseille were improving the recipe, adding costly ingredients such as saffron, which gave the stock a golden hue and earned it the nickname '*la soupe d'or*'.



DID YOU KNOW

Bouillabaisse comes from the Provençal word *bouiabaïssu*

Above: Chefs get their fresh fish every morning at Marseille's Vieux-Port

Left: The recipe for *bouillabaisse* has evolved over time

Below: Visitors are eager to sample Marseille's speciality dish

Bouillabaisse was so popular that it was mentioned by writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Alexandre Dumas. Artists were also taking notice of the soup. While working on his famous sunflowers in August of 1888, Vincent van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo telling him that he was "painting with the spirit of a Marseillais eating *bouillabaisse*." In his book, *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Mon Père* (1962), Jean Renoir recounts how the mayor of L'Estaque (a fishing port west of Marseille) had given the recipe for a proper *bouillabaisse* to his father and Cézanne in 1895. Cézanne, in turn, passed the recipe on to Monet.

The first official recipe, which listed 40 types of fish suitable for the soup, was published in 1897 in the influential cookbook, *La Cuisinière Provençale*, by Jean-Baptiste Reboul. Gradually, rules started to chip away at the dish's rustic charm. Nevertheless, while professional chefs continued

tweaking the recipe, elevating it to a culinary masterpiece that seemed almost impossible to reproduce, home cooks adhered to the fuss-free versions passed along by their grandmothers.

La vraie bouillabaisse?

Today, there are as many versions of *bouillabaisse* as there are chefs. Some add white wine, while others say it should only accompany the dish at the table. Pastis, the local *apéritif*, is sometimes added to enhance the anise flavour of the fennel. Potatoes and orange peel are optional. Lobster is a heresy, some argue. The garlic croutons should be slathered with *rouille* (a thick sauce made with red peppers, saffron, garlic and bread), but can also be substituted with aioli (garlic mayonnaise). In short, no two recipes are exactly alike. What we can say, however, is that some versions are better than others.

In 1980, the basic ingredients, preparation and presentation of ▶





Above: A fisherman in Marseille, home of *bouillabaisse*

bouillabaisse were regulated in the 'Charte de la Bouillabaisse', a charter drawn up by a group of restaurateurs in Marseille. Disappointed at the quality of the *bouillabaisse* served at many restaurants, they came up with a list of guidelines constituting authenticity. The soup should include at least four types of fish from the Mediterranean, among them scorpionfish, weaver, conger eel, John Dory, red mullet and monkfish. Freshness is imperative – chefs at reputable restaurants get their fish every morning from the market at the Vieux-Port.

It is also advised that *bouillabaisse* be served in two separate dishes: one for the broth (eaten with the croutons) and the other for the fish and potatoes (if used). The fish and broth can be eaten together, but the fish must always be filleted at the table.

Keep it simple

Though nothing quite tops enjoying a beautifully prepared *bouillabaisse* at a harbourside restaurant in Marseille on a sunny day, making your own version of the dish at home isn't difficult. Recipes abound in cookbooks and online, but which to choose?

Alain Ducasse makes his with tomato purée and star anise. Gérard Passédat of three-star restaurant Le Petit Nice in Marseille adds lobster. Julia Child advises to make the dish for at least six people because "ideally you should pick six or more varieties of fresh fish."

What you should keep in mind is to use the freshest fish possible. The rest is fairly straightforward. Make the bouillon by sweating onions, fennel and garlic in plenty of fragrant olive oil. Add small rockfish or fish heads and trimmings as well as aromatics such as orange peel, bay leaf, herbes de provence and saffron.

Follow with tomatoes (fresh and pureed), a shot of white wine or pastis, water, salt and pepper. Let this boil rapidly for 20 minutes before blending the soup until smooth. With the soup on a low heat, add pieces of firm-fleshed fish, cook for five minutes and follow with tender-fleshed fish and shellfish, if using.

Serve the soup as you wish, keeping in mind culinary writer Austin de Croze's wise words: "Those who have attempted to complicate the simple recipe for a *bouillabaisse* have succeeded only in spoiling its character." ♥

Where to eat *bouillabaisse*

CHEZ MICHEL

Tel: 0033 (0)4 91 52 64 22

restaurant-michel-13.fr

Since 1946, Chez Michel has been serving carefully prepared seafood dishes and a *bouillabaisse* that has made it the talk of the town. Located in Les Catalans, just 15 minutes from Marseille's centre, the restaurant ranks high on the list of favourites among discerning food critics – and rightly so. The level of cooking has earned Chez Michel a Michelin star, and you'll understand why once you sample the rich, aromatic broth followed by the delicate flavour-infused fillets.

Bouillabaisse: €78

LE RHUL

Tel: 0033 (0)4 91 52 54 54

hotel-restaurant-le-rhul.com

With panoramic views that stretch over the glistening Mediterranean, dining at Le Rhul is truly a feast for all the senses. The restaurant prides itself on being president of the 'Charte de la Bouillabaisse' and strictly adhering to tradition. Though the servings are plentiful, you'll want to make room for something sweet from the dessert trolley, which boasts a stunning selection of classic pastries. The restaurant is part of a three-star hotel and offers attractive *bouillabaisse* package deals.

Bouillabaisse: €48

LE MIRAMAR

Tel: 0033 (0)4 91 91 10 40

lemiramar.fr

Situated on the Vieux-Port, Le Miramar is one of Marseille's most famed *bouillabaisse* restaurants, and the best part is that they're more than happy to share their recipe with you! Join one of the cooking classes held every third Thursday of the month and learn how to make the dish from the chef himself.

Bouillabaisse: €69