

Go big with layered shellfish stew

As noted, I view January as bowl-food month. Therefore, I shall close out the month with an ambitious stew. I won't lie — it's a bit of a project. But hey, since many of us are homebound and hunkering down, why not roll up our sleeves and have some fun with this recipe?

I am a big fan of chowders and cioppinos, as you may have noticed, and I created this recipe with the deliberate intention of layering a stew with big bites, flavors and textures. It's winter, after all, which is the season of layering: layers of clothing, layers of bedding, and layers of nourishing ingredients in our meals.

This stew is the sum of its parts.



LYNDA BALSLEV

Each ingredient stands out, yet complements the whole, with a balance of sweet, smoke, heat and brine. Each ingredient is addressed separately before uniting in the pot, taking care to prevent a mushy muddle.

Smoky chorizo slices are browned first for char and flavor, then set aside to prevent softening and dullness in color by overcooking in the soup. Their legacy — flavorful oil — remains in the pot to infuse the stew with heat and smoke. Planks of butternut squash are then sauteed in the oil to lightly caramelize and coax out their sweetness. They, too, are set aside and added in the end, to avoid turning mushy while preserving their brilliant saffron color.

The stock continues to develop with the usual suspects (aromatics, wine, tomato), and then the clams are added. As the clams simmer, their shells open, releasing their briny juice into the stock. The ingredients reunite, and the stew is topped with fried oyster croutons, spiked with Sriracha, adding a crispy playful bite. A cooling dollop of saffron-scented aioli adds a creamy finish.

This is a big one-bowl meal. While it's labeled a stew, it's meant to be dug into with a fork, possibly a knife, and, of course, a spoon.

Smoky Clam and Chorizo Stew With Butternut Squash and Fried Oyster Croutons

Active time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Total time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Yield: Serves 4

Aioli ingredients:

- 1/2 cup homemade or good-quality mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon Sriracha or hot sauce
- Generous pinch of saffron threads



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFOOD

Smoky clam and chorizo stew features butternut squash and fried oyster croutons.

Oyster crouton ingredients:

- 12 to 16 shucked oysters
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 teaspoon Sriracha or hot sauce
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Stew ingredients:

- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 12 ounces Spanish-style chorizo sausage, sliced 1/2-inch thick
- 1 small butternut squash, peeled and seeded, cut in 1-inch squares about 1/2-inch thick
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large roasted red bell pepper, peeled and seeded, drained well if jarred, chopped
- 2 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- 1/2 cup dry white wine, such as sauvignon blanc
- 1 (28-ounce) can Italian plum tomatoes, with juice
- 1 bay leaf
- 12 to 16 Manila or midleneck clams
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Vegetable oil for frying
- Chopped fresh Italian parsley leaves for garnish

Steps:

- Whisk the aioli ingredients in a small bowl and refrigerate until use.
- Place the oysters in a bowl. Whisk the buttermilk and Sriracha in a separate bowl, then pour over the oysters to cover and set aside.
- Whisk the cornmeal, flour, salt and pepper in another bowl and set aside.
- Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a deep skillet or wide pot over medium-high heat. Add the

sausage slices and brown on both sides, about 6 minutes. Transfer the sausage to a plate lined with a paper towel. Add the squash to the skillet, in batches if necessary, and pan-fry in the sausage oil until tender but still firm and lightly charred on both sides, 5 to 6 minutes. Transfer to a plate.

If the pan is dry, add 1 tablespoon olive oil. Add the onion and saute until slightly softened, about 3 minutes. Add the roasted red pepper and garlic and saute about 1 minute more. Stir in the tomato paste, paprika, thyme and red pepper flakes and cook, stirring, for about 1 minute. Pour in the wine to deglaze the pan, and reduce by about half, scraping up any brown bits. Add the tomatoes and bay leaf. Simmer, uncovered, until slightly thickened, 15 to 20 minutes, breaking up the tomatoes with a wooden spoon.

Add the clams to the stew. Cover the skillet and cook until the clam shells open, 8 to 10 minutes, depending on the size. (Discard any unopened clam shells.) Season to taste with salt and black pepper.

While the stew is simmering, fill a large heavy saucepan with 2 inches of vegetable oil. Heat over medium-high heat until a deep fry thermometer reads 350 degrees.

Remove the oysters from the buttermilk, shaking off any excess liquid. Dredge in the corn flour. Fry in batches, without overcrowding, until golden and crispy, 1 to 2 minutes. Drain on a plate lined with a paper towel.

Ladle the stew into warm serving bowls. Top each bowl with 3 to 4 oysters. Spoon a little saffron aioli into the center of the soup. Garnish with parsley. Serve immediately.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning cookbook author, recipe developer, tester and editor. Taste Food is distributed by Andrews McMeel Syndication.

COVID-19 protocols change with rise of the omicron variant

Q When someone tests positive for COVID-19 now, what are they supposed to do? So much has changed since the pandemic started, what with the vaccines, boosters and different variants. Now they're changing how long to isolate. I'm confused.

A You are far from alone in feeling overwhelmed by new and changing information as the pandemic continues. The coronavirus that causes COVID-19 was brand new to humans when it emerged, which means we've had to collect, process and act upon enormous amounts of new information in real time.

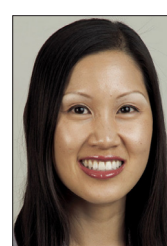
Now, with the highly contagious omicron variant driving a spike in new COVID-19 cases, each of us needs to know what steps to take if we test positive for the virus. First, it's important to understand that a positive test means that you are infected with the virus and are capable of passing it on to others. This is true even for individuals who are fully vaccinated. If you're in a public place or around other people when you learn your test results, you should immediately put on a mask. The virus is airborne, and with every exhalation, an infected person puts others at risk.

The next step is a five-day isolation period, during which you have as little contact as possible with others. People who live alone should not venture out. Those living with others — family or roommates — need to stay in a single room. When contact is absolutely necessary, it should be as brief as possible, and all involved should wear a high-quality mask. In a household with multiple bathrooms, one should be designated for the infected person's sole use. If that's not possible, everyone needs to wear a mask when using the space. An open window and a fan can help with ventilation. The virus is present in stool, so be sure to close the toilet

ASK THE DOCTORS



EVE GLAZIER



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seat when flushing. Sanitize any surface that you touch each time that you touch it.

As of this writing, if you are symptom-free after five days, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now says it's OK to

leave isolation. However, you need to avoid close contact with others and continue to wear a mask for another five days. If you do develop symptoms, check with your doctor for specific guidance. The CDC also recommends that people with symptomatic COVID-19 should isolate for at least 10 days.

Anyone who came into direct contact with you while you were infected should immediately begin wearing a mask, and they should continue to do so for 10 days. Two to three days after exposure, anyone who was exposed to you should be tested. If someone subsequently tests positive for the virus, then the isolation and masking protocols apply to them, as well.

Some states have enacted guidelines that differ from CDC recommendations. To be sure you're following the proper protocols for your particular area, check with your state health department at usa.gov/state-health.

Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA, is an internist and associate professor of medicine at UCLA Health. Elizabeth Ko, M.D., is an internist and assistant professor of medicine at UCLA Health.

Resources are available to address local food insecurity

To reduce your risk of infection, support your immune system. Try to exercise every day, even if it is a light intensity walk outside.



KATHY KOLASA

longer, how come everyone doesn't have access to the foods to do it?

The idea of enhancing longevity through food and exercise is clearly not a new one, but everyone does not have access to quality foods that make up a balanced diet. Distance to travel to a grocery store, getting time off from work to shop, and simply the costs are common barriers people face in eastern North Carolina when trying to access healthy food.

So, what can you do to help? First, we must understand food insecurity or FI. FI is when individuals lack the appropriate types and or amounts of food for an active, healthy life. This problem can be persistent or episodic especially among families with children who have limited resources. COVID-19 has only made matters worse as the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina estimates up to 600,000 families in the area may



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struggle to access food.

One-way physicians and others measure FI is by asking two questions. If the individual or family responds, "yes that applies to me" to either of the following two statements: "We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more" and "The food we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more." Many studies highlight that FI may negatively affect children's ability since birth to thrive, their immune functioning, obesity rate,

and risk of hospitalization.

In Pitt County, nearly two of every three children receive free or reduced cost lunches. If they are eligible for those meals, it underscores their families may need additional resources to help them learn. A recent article from the White House highlights that rate of FI decreased following increased access to government aid and resources including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) often referred to as food stamps.

Simply put, we need

you. The only way we will beat FI is with your help identifying those who are eligible to enroll in these programs and those who need help accessing quality foods. So instead of talking about the newest diet or dietary supplement in 2022 to change your life, let's start the discussion around ensuring everyone in our community has access to healthy food.

In Pitt County, we have some resources available. The JOY Soup Kitchen at 700 Albemarle Ave. has daily lunches from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and evening meals from 5-6 p.m. Numerous churches also hold events to give food to those who cannot otherwise access it. Note that Brody medical students played a part in developing the Medical Food Pantry at Vidant Medical Center. This is for patients who need emergency assistance as they leave the hospital, or a clinic visit at ECU Health.

If FI, they will receive a large bag of food and educational materials on how to eat healthy on a budget that meets the diet prescription their physician has given them to help them heal or manage their medi-

cal condition like diabetes or high blood pressure. This pantry was established in 2018 as a partnership among VMC, the Brody School of Medicine and the Food Bank of Eastern North Carolina. Financial donations are welcomed. You can google "food pantries near your town" to find a list of local resources or email Kathy Kolasa.

Next time you see an advertisement for that exotic fruit that'll "change your life" or diet trend, ask yourself and those around you if everyone in the room has access to quality food in the first place. You can't always tell if a person is food insecure and there's a good chance the people you see every day may not have access to quality foods. You may play a big part in helping that friend you talk to on your walk into work or a patient who for many different reasons might be FI, access a basic human right.

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