

Cioppino

FISHERMAN'S SOUP

- ❖ *Crostini con Prosciutto Crudo e Asparagi*
- ❖ *Assortimento di Pane con Pâté di Anatra, Salumi, Olive, e Melanzane*
- ❖ *Insalata Mista con Gorgonzola, Prosciutto Fritto, e Avocado*
- ❖ *Condimento di Crescione, Barbabietola e Sugo di Arancia*
- ❖ *Cioppino di Michelina*
- ❖ *Ancora Pane*
- ❖ *Torta di Ricotta*
- ❖ *Caffè*

Many months earlier, we had gone to Mexico to spend a week on the beach. I wanted to go to the fish market. Jim and Kate didn't want to go. Rudy wanted to go, too, which was a good thing because I don't speak Spanish. Jim did not want to take care of Kristin because he and Kate were planning to swim. It's not easy to swim when you're in a wheelchair. Kristin did not really want to go to the fish market, but Rudy and I couldn't go without her.

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We took a vote and she was outnumbered. "Kris, we're going to the fish market."

Now, a fish market in Ensenada is another story all by itself. Needless to say, it was wet, smelly, and the fish come in whole sizes only. We couldn't even recognize fish we ate regularly in the States. We got a lot of stares, me with my blond hair, Kristin in her wheelchair, obviously mine, and Rudy? What was that guy doing with those gringas? We came home with crab claws, some whitefish for ceviche, and lobsters (contraband at that time of year but we didn't figure it out at the time). It was our last day before coming home. We steamed the shellfish, melted a lot of butter, and finished off the beans, rice, and tortillas while sitting in our dining room on the sand. The meal for six cost less than \$30. "How does this relate to



cioppino?” you ask. It does. Read on. Never one to throw away any food, I took the empty crab and lobster shells, along with everything else left in the refrigerator (onion, carrot, cilantro, parsley, tomatoes, etc.) and boiled them all evening on the stove. Before I went to bed, I filled two large plastic containers and put them in the freezer. They became the ice blocks for cooling the drinks and fresh tortillas we brought back with us across the border. I had been saving these incredibly rich stocks for just the right cold stormy evening.

Today was the day!

I put the frozen stock on the counter and drove to the fish market. It’s good to make *cioppino* when you have a large group of people, because it takes a large variety of fish to make it very tasty. I try to count each piece per person when buying the fish. The flavors are delicious the next day, but the fish can get overcooked if you reheat it, so it’s better to buy small amounts of each fish. This will usually drive your fishmonger mad, not to mention all the people who are in line behind you. If you go shopping early, they will remain your friends.

“Contadino scarpe grosse cervello fino.

(A peasant’s shoes are heavy and his brain is fine.)”

Appunti/Notes

TOASTS WITH HAM AND ASPARAGUS ~ I didn't actually make these myself.

They were delicious, although I would have melted a little pecorino or havarti underneath the ham and asparagus.

ASSORTMENT OF BREADS WITH PÂTÉ, SALAMI, OLIVES, AND

EGGPLANT ~ Since *cioppino* is basically a hearty soup or a runny stew, it's perfectly paired with fresh, hot bread. I like to buy various types, because everyone seems to have a different favorite. A few slices before the meal on a cold winter's night are generally not refused. A carbohydrate-less version of this meal would just be a sin.

MIXED GREEN SALAD WITH GORGONZOLA, PROSCIUTTO, AND

AVOCADO ~ The meal is really all about the soup, so only a little bit of cheese, crispy prosciutto, and avocado were put into the salad. A plain salad would be acceptable here, too.

SALAD DRESSING OF PURÉED WATERCRESS, BEETS, AND ORANGE

JUICE ~ Most of the *cioppino* preparation is later in the day. I was bored so I cleaned out the refrigerator and puréed some leftover roasted beets with some watercress, and then added olive oil, salt, pepper, orange juice, a little white wine vinegar, and a bit of water until it tasted good enough to put on lettuce. It was very purple, and looked good drizzled onto the salad and served on large white plates.

FISHERMAN'S SOUP ~ The trick to making really good *cioppino* is to recognize that

it's a soup, not shellfish coated in a thick red tomato sauce. The soup should be made from fish stock, and have only enough tomato to give it flavor and a bit of color. It's about the fish, not the tomato. You can put many different types of fish into *cioppino*. If you use no shellfish, it is more like a *bouillabaisse* or soup, as opposed to a soup-like stew. I personally like a lot of shellfish, still in their shells. On this night I used small lobster tails, crab, *calamari*, shrimp, clams, and some form of mild—though meaty—white fish (never salmon). This is a meal where you might as well put the napkin under you chin, roll up your sleeves and get your fingers into it. I like to serve it to





my more formal friends, too, because it insists they become peasants, like me. I've been making *cioppino* for many years, but the best one occurred the time I kept the stock and fish separate until the very end. I created the soup by sautéing the standard *soffritto* (finely diced onion, carrot and celery), and adding parsley and herbs from my garden at the end. I added some whole tomatoes, cubed potatoes, and larger pieces of carrot and celery to simmer with the defrosted stock all afternoon. Now the stock was more concentrated, and the vegetables were fork tender. I turned it off and let it sit until dinner time, making sure it did not get cool. I flash fried the shellfish on medium high heat with more onion and a little garlic, starting with the biggest pieces first. As soon as each piece took on a little bit of color I took it off the fire and added it to the soup, where it continued to cook very slowly. After the last piece of fish went into the pot, the *cioppino* was just about ready to serve.

MORE BREAD ~ Serve it piping hot with lots of butter.

CHEESECAKE AND COFFEE ~ Who needs it after several bowls of *cioppino* on a cold Friday evening?

It's much simpler to cook the fish directly in the pot of simmering stock, and I have done this many times. The flavor, however, if you take the time to fry the vegetables and fish first, is much more intense, because their natural sugars will caramelize. Start slowly, get the cooking order down first, and then "Kick it up a notch."

“*Il caffè deve essere nero come la notte, caldo come l'inferno.*

(Coffee must be black like the night, hot like an inferno.)”