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Low and slow: Poaching in olive oil takes seafood to sophisticated levels

By Alina Dizik

Last Modified: Jan 1, 2012 08:02AM

Cooking fish in your home kitchen can be unforgiving. Overcook by a few minutes and it's too dry. Skip a step and you end up with a bland fillet.

Using olive oil to poach fish (or any other seafood) is a foolproof solution to getting flavor that's sophisticated yet subtle. Used in the city's top kitchens — Tru, Spiaggia, L20 — it's a simple technique to appropriate in a home oven.

“It is a very delicate process. It brings the fish flavor forward, as well as the moisture — the flavor gets brighter,” explains Matthew Kirkley, the recently named executive chef at L20, who uses the technique to prepare a variety of seafood as part of the Lincoln Park restaurant's changing prix fixe options.

While most cooks start out with raw fish that's marinated or lightly seasoned and saturated in olive oil, the particulars of the olive oil-poaching process can vary.

Anthony Martin, chef and partner at Tru, 676 N. St. Clair, recommends heating the oven to 350 degrees and placing the fish on the stovetop in a submerged olive oil bath, using the gentle heat generated by the oven. Other chefs place the pan directly into the oven.

No matter which technique you choose, watch the temperature and consider using a meat thermometer to regulate it, Martin says.

“Keep it consistent and do not let it fluctuate,” he says.

Using heat from the oven rather than a gas burner helps to poach at a lower temperature and prevents overcooking.

In Stephanie Izard's cookbook *Girl in the Kitchen* (Chronicle Books, \$29.95), she explains why it's a favorite: “What sets this method apart is that while pan-frying uses high heat to create a crisp outer layer that traps in the moisture, poaching at a low temperature in oil surrounds the protein in fat, allowing it to slowly steam on the inside.”

When poaching, Izard covers the olive oil-soaked seafood with aluminum and places it on a saute pan inside the oven.

She prefers poaching shrimp: “Once you’ve had a shrimp so delicately poached that it almost melts in your mouth, you’ll have a whole new appreciation for the tiny delicacies,” she writes.

But there’s no need to be picky at the supermarket. Almost any fish will do, says L20’s Kirkley.

“I opt to [use] something with a high oil content. Sturgeon works well, just make sure it is skin-off,” he says. Salmon is another sturdy fish that becomes delicate and moist and is commonly poached in olive oil.

Spiaggia’s Sarah Grueneberg uses seafood to shorten the poaching process.

“For a quick poach, to eat immediately, I like shrimp, lobster, scallop and cod,” says Grueneberg, a contestant on Bravo’s “Top Chef Texas.”

Since the fish actually absorbs the olive oil flavor, use a mid-priced oil or one that’s extra virgin.

“As opposed to frying where the goal is not to have the extra flavor picked up by the food, in poaching you want that flavor to sink in, so it’s important to use a high-quality oil,” Izard explains.

Figuring out ways to re-appropriate the oil helps keep costs down and is important to do before you start preparing the meal. Your best bet is to re-use the oil in a side dish, which can subtly tie in the fish’s flavor throughout the meal.

“I love using that oil in the pasta itself or making a tuna-flavored mayonnaise,” says Grueneberg. At Spiaggia, she serves tagliolini with olive oil-poached tuna, cauliflower, almonds, Controne pepper and sea beans.

Don’t pour off the oil right away. Keep the fish in the oil until you plan to eat it, which helps protect the fish from drying out, Grueneberg says.

Izard writes that the oil can be strained and used in subsequent meals to poach more fish, create soup bases and drizzle on vinaigrettes. Just make sure to store it, refrigerated, in a spillproof container.

Complement your rich protein with a lighter, veggie-based side.

“You need high acidity: sauteed greens with a squeeze of citrus, arugula salad with vinaigrette,” Kirkley says. “The citrus will cut through the fat.”

For a more rustic approach, combine the poached fish into one main entree, suggests Grueneberg.

“I love a simple salad of olive oil-poached tuna with tomatoes, potatoes and capers,” she says. Another Italian twist: “Lightly chop the tuna or fish for a spread eaten with a great crusty bread.”

If you’re in a hurry to get dinner on the table, don’t just raise the temperature — avoid poaching altogether. The key is to poach the protein very slowly in order to keep the rich flavor and let the fish’s color deepen gradually.

“This is a process that can’t be rushed,” Martin says.

Alina Dizik is a Chicago free-lance writer.

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