

by Ron James

THE CHEF

Cathal Armstrong was as freaked out as an executive chef could be. An important woman expected for lunch the next day had arrived without warning. Armstrong and the surprised staff of the Washington, D.C., Bistro Bis whipped up the best lunch they could, then held their breath as she dined. When finished, the woman said she was so pleased that she would return with a friend. The next day, Julia Child was back - along with Jacques Pepin - to enjoy a leisurely lunch.

Although the Irish-born Armstrong shared his parent's passion for food, cooking for a living was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I'm not sure I've made that decision even now," said Armstrong, who was honored as one of Food and Wine Magazine's best American chefs in 2006.

"I ended up in the business by accident. I was taking computer programming and started to wash dishes at a nearby Dublin restaurant. I enjoyed watching the chefs and was enthralled with their knife skills. As fate would have it, the chef got sick and they had me fill in. The chef never came back - so I was the chef."

Soon after, the 19-year-old Armstrong and two partners opened a French restaurant in the Dublin suburbs. "My dad came up with the hare-brained scheme," he said. "It lasted about six months, but I learned many lessons."

CATHAL ARMSTRONG - Cathal Armstrong runs the nationally acclaimed Restaurant Eve in Old Town Alexandria, Va., near Washington, D.C. CNS Photo. **BEST BOUILLABAISSE** - Chef Cathal Armstrong says the key to making excellent bouillabaisse is to use fresh ingredients, especially the fish and shellfish.

CNS Photo. Like that he needed more experience - which America provided. "In Washington, D.C., I decided to work about three months for tuition to go back to school. That was 17 years ago. It was all about the money at the time. Then I met my wife Meshelle and everything changed."

Twelve years after arriving here, with support and inspiration from Meshelle, Armstrong opened his nationally acclaimed Restaurant Eve - named after their first child - in Old Town Alexandria, Va.

THE DISH

Bouillabaisse is a fish soup said to have originated in Marseille, France, in the 1700s. It is the royalty of fish soups, characterized not by the fish, but the magic achieved from olive oil, spices and herbs, including saffron, leeks and fennel. The broth can be made a day or two ahead and refrigerated.

The keys to Armstrong's bouillabaisse are fresh ingredients, especially the fish and shellfish. It's best to shop at a seafood market where fresh product is usually abundant. Ask for fish bones for the stock - most likely you'll get them for free.

The dish calls for harissa, which is a hot, Tunisian red chile paste or sauce. It is sold in jars or tubes online or in specialty food markets.

THE WINE

It is essential that this flavorful dish be served with a very nice white wine, such as the highly rated yet affordable 2000 Artesa Reserve Sauvignon Blanc (\$17).

Artesa is in the Carneros area of the Napa Valley and is one of the newest wineries in the region. They open under the name Codorniu and produced sparkling wine. In 1997, they changed direction to focus on ultra-premium still wines. Their sauvignon blanc has rich fruit-forward flavors of melons and citrus mellowed with vanilla tones in the finish. It received 90 points from Wine Spectator.

BOUILLABAISSE

Broth:

1 medium bulb fennel, roughly chopped

2 leeks, white and tender green parts, roughly chopped

1 head peeled garlic, roughly chopped

8 shallots, roughly chopped

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon saffron, packed tightly

3 large vine-ripened tomatoes, roughly chopped

2 tablespoons tomato paste

2 pounds non-oily white fish bones, cleaned, all blood removed

3 quarts water

2 bay leaves

4 thyme sprigs

4 parsley sprigs

Rouille:

1 Idaho potato, peeled and cut in large dice

1 cup broth

2 large egg yolks

2 cloves chopped garlic

1/2 roasted red pepper

2 teaspoons harissa or to taste

3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Salt, to taste

Soup:

1/2 bulb of fennel, cut in 1/2-inch dice

1 leek, washed, cored, cut in 1/2-inch dice

2 cloves peeled garlic, minced

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 Idaho potato, peeled and cut in 1/2-inch dice

1 large vine-ripened tomato, peeled, seeded and cut in 1/2-inch dice

12 littleneck clams, scrubbed and rinsed

16 mussels, debearded

4 large prawns

1 1/2 pounds cleaned white fish like cod, rockfish, snapper or monkfish, cut in 2-inch chunks

3 tablespoons chopped basil

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Baguette slices, brushed with olive oil, toasted

Lemon wedges, for serving

Yields 4 servings.

For broth: Over low heat, sweat fennel, leeks, garlic and shallots in olive oil until tender. Add saffron and cook 1 minute. Increase heat to medium-high and add tomatoes and tomato paste and cook for 2 minutes stirring constantly. Add fish bones, water, bay leaves, thyme and parsley and bring to a simmer. Cook for 45 minutes. Strain and set aside.

For rouille: Cook potato in broth until tender, strain and reserve liquid (you may need it to thin rouille later).

In food processor, place cooked potato, egg yolks, garlic, roasted pepper and harissa. Turn on processor and add olive oil in thin stream. Season to taste with salt.

Note: The rouille should have the texture of mayonnaise; you can use reserved broth to thin, if needed.

For soup: In large braising pan, sweat fennel, leek and garlic in olive oil until tender. Add potato and continue to sweat until tender. Add tomato, clams and remaining broth (from above). Increase heat to medium and cook until clams start to open. Add mussels, prawns and fish and cook until all seafood is just cooked. Season bouillabaisse to taste with salt. Add basil and lemon juice.

Garnish with baguette croutons.

Serve with rouille and lemon wedge on side.

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Food and Wine: Napa sauvignon blanc sets stage for Tunisian-inspired bouillabaisse by Ron James