

Gourmet Magazine

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MELISSA KELLY HAD LONG KNOWN the components of her dream. She pictured herself behind the stove at a charming but unprepossessing restaurant, with gardens out back, in a peaceful New England town where she could cook the gutsy, imaginative food she loved. She just hadn't figured in those cantankerous fire sprinklers.

In the course of realizing her vision, Kelly acquired a pedigree most chefs can only fantasize about: She graduated at the top of her class from The Culinary Institute of America, worked for two of the brightest stars in the restaurant world (Larry Forgione and Alice Waters), and won the 1999 James Beard Best Chef Northeast award for her work at the Old Chatham Shepherding Company Inn, in the Hudson River Valley. A year and a half ago she opened Primo in Rockland, Maine, where she and her fiance, pastry chef Price Kushner, could finally call the shots. They have also endured intense excitement, aching long hours, and nail-biting pressure.

"The worst moment came during the first month we were open," Kelly recalls. "We were just finishing up with the dinner prep--sauces were done, desserts were ready--when suddenly the sprinklers inexplicably went off, spraying a fire-suppression chemical over every station in the kitchen. The Fryolator reacted to the chemical, and the oil bubbled up and overflowed onto the floor. We were faced with a kitchen full of chemicals, hot grease, and ruined food. We had about two hours to clean up and start over again before dinner service.

I thought my staff were going to walk out on me."



These days things tend to go much more smoothly. Kelly's extensive flower, herb, and vegetable gardens are flourishing, and her flavorful, heartfelt rustic food has earned her a quiet but devoted following. Locals have fallen in love with her relaxed cooking, and she has customers who travel hundreds of miles for a meal at Primo. "I don't need to be a big-time chef, I really don't," Kelly said earlier in her career. "All I need is to have a little restaurant that makes people happy." And Kelly's food is so good that its robust flavors make people happy even when transported to an urban setting and cooked in a home kitchen. Her dream may have come true in Maine, but her recipes travel.

FISH SOUP WITH BREAD AND ROUILLE

Serves 6

Active time: 1 3/4hr Start to finish: 4 1/4 hr

(includes making stock and rouille)

1 large leek, green part coarsely chopped and white part cut into 1/4-inch pieces
5 tablespoons olive oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
2 celery ribs, coarsely chopped
2 carrots, coarsely chopped
3 garlic cloves, smashed
1/4 teaspoon crumbled saffron threads
2 bay leaves (not California)
1 teaspoon dried hot red pepper flakes
1 1/4 lb plum tomatoes, coarsely chopped
3 tablespoons canned tomato puree
2 cups dry white wine
1 1/2 qt white fish stock (recipe follows)
1 (8- to 9-inch) unsliced round or oval pain au levain or sourdough loaf (1 lb), crust discarded
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 lb skinned white fish fillets such as halibut, snapper, and/or bass, cut into 1-inch cubes
1 teaspoon salt
2 cups rouille (this page)
1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano
1 tablespoon chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

Make broth:

Wash green and white parts of leek separately in a bowl of cold water, then lift out with a slotted spoon and pat dry. Heat 3 tablespoons oil in a 6-quart heavy pot over moderate heat until hot but not smoking, then cook leek greens, onion, celery, and carrots, stirring, until beginning to soften, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, 3 minutes. Add saffron, bay leaves, and red pepper flakes and cook, stirring, 2 minutes. Add fresh tomatoes and tomato puree and cook, stirring, 4 minutes. Add wine and simmer, uncovered, until liquid is reduced by about half, about 30 minutes.

Stir in stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, 30 minutes. Carefully pour through a fine sieve into a bowl, then discard solids.

Prepare croutes while broth simmers:

Preheat oven to 300F.

Heat a well-seasoned ridged grill pan over moderately high heat until hot. Brush bread with remaining 2 tablespoons oil, then grill on all sides until grill marks appear. Tear bread into rough 3-inch pieces and bake on a baking sheet in middle of oven until crisp outside but soft inside, about 10 minutes. Cool croutes.

Heat butter in a 4-quart heavy saucepan over moderate heat until foam subsides, then cook white part of leek, stirring, until beginning to soften, about 2 minutes. Add fish, hot broth, and salt and bring to a simmer (fish will be cooked through). Remove from heat and stir in

1/2 cup rouille.

Put croutes in soup plates and ladle soup over. Sprinkle with oregano and parsley and serve remaining rouille on the side.

Cooks' note:

- Broth can be made 2 days ahead and cooled, uncovered, then chilled, covered. Reheat broth before adding to white part of leek along with fish and rouille.

WHITE FISH STOCK

Makes about 1 1/2 quarts

Active time: 20 min Start to finish: 45 min

2 lb bones and trimmings of white fish such as halibut, snapper, flounder, and/or bass, chopped

1 large onion, sliced

1 medium fennel bulb (sometimes called anise), stalks trimmed flush with bulb and bulb coarsely chopped

24 fresh parsley sprigs (with long stems)

1/4 cup fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon salt

7 cups cold water

1 cup dry white wine

Cook fish bones and trimmings, onion, fennel, parsley sprigs, lemon juice, and salt in a well-buttered 4- to 6-quart heavy pot, covered, over moderate heat 5 minutes.

Add water and wine and bring to a boil, skimming froth. Simmer, uncovered, 20 minutes, then pour through a very fine sieve into a large bowl, discarding solids.

Cooks' note:

- Stock keeps 2 days. Cool, uncovered, then chill, covered.

ROUILLE

Makes about 2 cups

Active time: 20 min Start to finish: 40 min

2 red bell peppers

6 garlic cloves

1 teaspoon salt

1 fresh jalapeno chile, seeded and chopped

1/2 cup fresh bread crumbs (preferably brioche or challah)

3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

Lay bell peppers on their sides on racks of gas burners and turn flame on high. (Or put on rack of broiler pan about 2 inches from heat.) Roast, turning with tongs, until skins are blackened, 8 to 12 minutes. Transfer peppers to a bowl, then cover and let steam 20 minutes. Remove skin and seeds from peppers and tear flesh into large pieces.

Mash garlic to a paste with salt using a mortar and pestle (or mince and mash with a large knife).

Puree bell peppers, garlic paste, jalapeno, and bread crumbs in a food processor. With motor running, slowly add oil, then lemon juice and pepper, blending until very smooth (it will look like an orange-pink mayonnaise).

Cooks' note:

- Rouille can be made 3 days ahead and chilled, covered. Bring to room temperature before using.

BUTTERNUT SQUASH GNOCCHI WITH DUCK CONFIT AND SWISS CHARD

Serves 6 (main course)

Active time: 1 3/4hr Start to finish: 2 1/2hr

For gnocchi

1 (11/2-lb) butternut squash, halved lengthwise and seeded

3/4 lb Yukon Gold potatoes

1 large egg, lightly beaten

1/2 cup finely grated Pecorino Romano (11/2 oz)

1/2 teaspoon finely chopped fresh thyme

1/2 teaspoon finely chopped fresh sage

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon white pepper

Pinch of nutmeg

3/4 cup all-purpose flour plus additional for dusting

For confit and chard

5 (6-oz) confit duck legs

5 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 lb Swiss chard, stems and tough center ribs discarded and leaves cut into 2- by 1-inch pieces, then washed (but not dried) 1/2 teaspoon salt

Accompaniment: grated Pecorino Romano

Special equipment: a potato ricer or a food mill fitted with fine disk

Form gnocchi:

Preheat oven to 500F.

Arrange squash halves, cut sides down, in an oiled shallow baking pan and put potatoes alongside. Roast vegetables in middle of oven until squash is tender, about 25 minutes. Transfer squash to a cutting board and potatoes to oven rack, then continue to roast potatoes until tender, about 12 minutes more.

When cool enough to handle, scrape flesh from squash, discarding skin, then force flesh through ricer into a bowl. Measure out 3/4 cup puree and put in another bowl (reserve remainder for another use). Remove skin from potatoes while still hot and force flesh through ricer into bowl with squash. Spread squash-potato puree in another shallow baking pan and cool completely.

Return puree to bowl and stir in egg, cheese, thyme, sage, salt, white pepper, and nutmeg. Add flour, then gently knead dough by hand 1 minute (it will be soft and slightly sticky) .

Turn dough out onto a floured cutting board and cut into 3 portions. Gently roll each portion into a long log about 3/4 inch thick. Cut each log into 3/4-inch pieces with a floured knife.

Press a piece of dough against tines of a floured fork and push with a floured thumb in a forward motion toward end of tines, letting gnocchi fall from fork onto a floured kitchen towel. Repeat with remaining pieces of dough.

Prepare confit:

Cook duck legs, skin sides down, in batches in a large heavy skillet over moderate heat, turning once, until browned and some of fat is rendered, about 5 minutes. Transfer duck to cleaned cutting board, then discard all but 1 tablespoon fat from skillet, reserving skillet.

When duck is cool enough to handle, discard skin and bones, then pull meat into 1/4-inch-thick pieces.

Cook gnocchi, chard, and duck:

Melt 3 tablespoons butter in a 12-inch heavy skillet and remove from heat. Cook gnocchi in 3 batches in a 6-quart pot of boiling salted water, stirring occasionally, until centers are cooked through, about 3 minutes. (Gnocchi will float to top after about 1 1/2 minutes.) Transfer as cooked with a slotted spoon to butter in skillet.

Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a 3- to 4-quart heavy saucepan over moderate heat, then stir in chard and salt. Cook, covered, just until wilted, 2 to 3 minutes.

While chard is wilting, heat reserved duck fat in skillet over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking, then saute duck, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, 2 to 3 minutes.

Add chard, including any cooking liquid, and duck to gnocchi and cook over moderate heat, tossing gently, until heated through. Serve sprinkled with cheese.

Cooks' note:

- **Squash-potato puree can be made 1 day ahead, cooled completely, then chilled, covered. Bring to room temperature before proceeding.**

CHEF'S SECRET

From Melissa Kelly: Save those Parmesan rinds--adding them to chicken stock gives it extra deep, rich flavor.

PISTACHIO POPOVER CREMES BRULEES WITH GRAND MARNIER SYRUP

Serves 6

Active time: 1 1/4 hr Start to finish: 6 1/4 hr
(includes chilling)

For custard

1/4 vanilla bean, halved lengthwise
2 cups heavy cream
4 large egg yolks
4 cup sugar

For syrup

1/2 vanilla bean, halved lengthwise
2 cups fresh orange juice
1 cup sugar
2 tablespoons Grand Marnier or other orange liqueur

For popovers

1/2 cup unsalted shelled natural pistachios
1/4 cup granulated sugar
1 cup all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup whole milk at room temperature
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
3 large eggs at room temperature
2 tablespoons superfine granulated sugar

Special equipment: a 9- by 5- by 3-inch glass loaf pan; a nonstick popover pan with 6 (5 1/2-oz) cups; a blowtorch

Make custard:

Scrape seeds from vanilla bean into cream in a 2-quart heavy saucepan, then add pod and bring to a simmer over moderate heat. Remove from heat, then steep, covered, 20 minutes. Discard pod.

Preheat oven to 325F.

Whisk together yolks, sugar, and a pinch of salt, then add hot cream in a slow stream,

whisking constantly. Pour through a fine sieve into glass loaf pan. Cover pan with foil and bake custard in a hot water bath until set but with center still slightly wobbly, about 1 hour.

Remove foil and cool custard in pan on a rack, then chill, covered, until firm, at least 4 hours.

Prepare syrup while custard bakes:

Scrape seeds from vanilla bean into juice in cleaned 2-quart heavy saucepan, then add pod and sugar.

Bring to a boil over moderately high heat, stirring until sugar is dissolved, then boil until reduced to about 1 1/4 cups, about 20 minutes. Remove from heat, then discard pod and stir in Grand Marnier. Cool to room temperature.

Make popovers:

Preheat oven to 375F.

Chop enough pistachios to measure 2 tablespoons. Pulse remaining nuts with regular granulated sugar in a food processor until finely ground. Add flour and salt and pulse to combine. Add milk, butter, and eggs and blend until just combined. Pour batter into well-buttered popover cups, filling them two-thirds full.

Bake in lower third of oven until popovers are puffed and well browned, about 40 minutes. Cut a 1/2-inch slit in top of each popover and bake 10 minutes more. Immediately turn popovers out onto rack to cool.

Assemble dessert:

Cut off tops of cooled popovers (see photo) and arrange in a baking dish. Brush tops with some syrup and heat in oven until warm, about 3 minutes.

While tops are heating, fill bottoms of popovers with custard. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon superfine sugar evenly over each custard, then move blowtorch flame evenly back and forth just over sugar until sugar is melted and caramelized.

Transfer popovers with tops to plates and spoon some syrup around each. Sprinkle with chopped nuts.

Cooks'note:

- Custard and syrup can be made 2 days ahead and chilled, covered. Bring custard to room temperature and warm syrup before proceeding.

If you don't have a blowtorch, these popover cremes brulees are just as delicious without the caramelized sugar top--the custard is firm enough to hold its shape and not spill over the edge.