

regional chowders

Chowder is synonymous with New England cuisine, yet flavorful variations on the hearty stew can be found from north to south and on both coasts.

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salmon chowder

THE WORD CHOWDER evokes thoughts of comfort and warmth on cool autumn nights, when there is no more delicious way to stave off the chill in the air than with a thick, creamy bowl of the stuff, laden with potatoes, clams, bacon, and topped with crunchy oyster crackers. But chowder didn't start as a fine-tuned recipe. It evolved from necessity in bygone days when sailors shared a heaping pot of stew made from the daily catch. Even its name is thought to be derived from the common pot used in the brisk northern waters of France, *chaudière*.

The Pilgrims were slow to pick up the Native Americans' love for shellfish, often feeding clams to their livestock, but by 1751, when a fish chowder recipe appeared in the *Boston Evening Post*, it's clear Bostonians had developed a taste for it. The recipe reads more like a sonnet than a how-to, but reveals a soup that was flavored with onion, salt pork, fish, thyme, parsley, and thickened with a biscuit. The soup grew in notoriety over the next century, appearing in cookbooks that spread chowder's name and popularity across the country.

The soup became an iconic destination dish for visitors to the shore, beloved by those whose land-locked locales made shellfish unavailable. As the soup became a national favorite, regional variations developed based on tastes and the availability of ingredients.

The nuances of chowder vary from coast to coast, drawing on both history and terroir. Chowder—whether clear, creamy, or tomatoey, served in a soup bowl or a bread bowl—is a unique and iconic American culinary experience. Here, we celebrate chowder, in all its forms.

The chowder most people think of as traditional is really New England-style clam chowder, characterized by its thick and creamy texture, made with potatoes, clams, and bits of bacon. When made right, this uniquely American soup reaches into the realm of the sublime.

Ye Olde Union Oyster House, the Boston restaurant that holds the honor of being the country's oldest continuously operating eatery, has had chowder on the menu since 1836, by which time it was a well-known New England specialty.

Restaurateurs like Boston's James Beard Award-winning chef and cookbook author Jasper White have built their reputations on chowder. Likewise, in the popular Cape Cod village of

New England clam chowder

Recipe from: Chef Tim McNulty, The Lobster Pot, Provincetown, MA

Sea clams are larger than littlenecks and are Chef Tim's preference for making chowder.

- 1 pound large sweet sea clams, washed and scrubbed
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup plus 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound onions, diced
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound potatoes, washed, scrubbed, and diced
- 2-3 cups canned or bottled clam juice
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1 cup flour
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup light cream

1. Place clams in a large pot and fill with 2 cups water. Cover, bring to a boil, and cook until shells open, about 10 minutes. Allow to cool. Remove and shuck clams (reserving 2 cups liquid), then dice. Set aside.
2. In a large stockpot, melt 3 tablespoons butter. Add onions and cook until translucent, about 10 minutes. Do not brown. Add potatoes, clams, clam juice (including reserved 2 cups reserved liquid), and pepper. Bring to a boil.
3. Meanwhile make a roux. In another stockpot, melt remaining $\frac{3}{4}$ cup butter. Using a whisk, slowly stir in flour until smooth. Continue to cook over low heat until other pot comes to a boil.
4. In a medium saucepan, heat milk and cream over low heat.
5. Once pot comes to a boil and potatoes are cooked, slowly stir in roux. Bring soup back to a boil. Slowly add in milk mixture and stir until combined. Serve warm.

Serves 4-6.

cook's note: If your finished liquid from the clams is short of 2 cups, simply add some water until you have enough.

Rhode Island clam chowder

Chef Jeff Cruff, Matunuck Oyster Bar, South Kingstown, RI
Recipe adapted from Jasper White, *Cooking From New England*.

- 8 pounds small quahogs or large cherrystone clams
- 4 ounces slab bacon, finely diced
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 medium onions, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
- 3 stalks celery, cut into $\frac{1}{3}$ -inch pieces
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 pounds potatoes, peeled and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
- 2-3 cups clam broth or bottled clam juice
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf Italian parsley
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh dill

1. Check clams and make sure none of them are already open. If any are, gently push shells together with your fingers to see if clam will close. If not, discard it. Scrub and rinse clams.
2. Steam clams. Place an inch of water in bottom of a large pot. Add clams and cover pot. Bring to a boil. Cook for 5-10 minutes, until shells are open. Remove clams from pot, discarding any that did not open. Strain and reserve broth. Dice clams into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces. Cover with plastic wrap and keep refrigerated until ready to use.
3. Place a large heavy pot over low heat and add bacon. Cook until bacon is crisp and golden brown. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of fat, leaving bacon in pot.
4. Increase heat to medium, and add butter, onions, celery, and bay leaves and cook, stirring occasionally for 10-15 minutes, until onions are softened.
5. Add potatoes, reserved clam broth, and 2-3 cups broth (adding 4 cups total), and continue to cook until chowder begins to simmer; if it begins to boil, turn down heat. Cook for about 15 minutes longer, until potatoes are very tender.
6. Remove pot from heat, stir in diced clams, and season with salt and black pepper. Stir in parsley, chives, and dill. Ladle chowder into serving bowls and serve warm.

Serves 8-10.

Provincetown, the Lobster Pot has been a destination for decades. Mere steps from the town's fishing dock, "The Pot," as locals know it, is home to Chef Tim McNulty's award-winning clam chowder.

Just south of chowder's Bostonian roots, Rhode Island is home to one of the country's largest and best-known chowder festivals, the Great Chowder Cook-off, held every summer in Newport. The festival attracts competitors from across the country and celebrates different styles and categories. Rhode Island's own variation has a clear broth, is made with cod or clams, and, like its Boston cousin, includes potatoes and bacon.

Just as Bostonians are adamant about their creamy chowder, Manhattanites cling to their own variation. Made with a clear tomato base instead of cream, the New Yorkers' version shows influences from Portuguese and Italian fishermen. Manhattan Clam Chowder, occasionally called "Fulton Fish Market Chowder" or "Coney Island Chowder," first became popular in the 1890s, appearing at restaurants like Delmonico's.

Rarely do both New England-style and Manhattan-style chowders appear on the same menu, as the tomato vs. cream issue can be contentious. The exception is in Long Island, where restaurants like The Chowder Bar in Bay Shore have made peace with the fact that they lie geographically in between Manhattan and New England, and have combined the best of both versions to create a creamy tomato chowder.

Further down the Eastern Seaboard, the chowder tradition continues to morph in coastal towns such as those along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Here, Hattaras Chowder rules. Like Rhode Island's version, it's a clear broth made with bacon and potatoes, but with extra ground black pepper, lots of clam juice, and a generous dousing of hot sauce. Until tourism boosted the local economy in 1963, the Outer Banks were one of the state's poorest regions. As a result, this soup is simple, economical, and sustaining. North Carolina native Vivian Howard, host of the PBS show *A Chef's Life*, includes eggs poached in the broth in her hearty riff on the soup.

Two thousand miles to the west there's another coast with its own claim on chowder. San Franciscans, culinary innovators that they are, have taken their beloved sourdough bread and turned it into the perfect receptacle for serving, with a hollowed out boule loaf making the perfect bowl for a creamy chowder on those foggy days the city is known for. The Old Clam House in Bayview is Frisco's oldest restaurant, serving its famous clam chowder out of the same rustic building since 1861.

Further north, where salmon swim upstream, Seattle's famed Pike Place Market is known around the world as a must-see visitor's destination. Market-goers watch orange-suited men toss huge fish back and forth, their voices barking above the crowds. The Native American tribes of the region (stretching into Alaska) preserved salmon by cold smoking it, and Pike Place Chowder has won chowder competitions from coast to coast with a recipe that incorporates the smoked salmon that gives this region its distinctive flavor.

Eastern North Carolina fish stew

Recipe from: Chef Vivian Howard, *The Chef and the Farmer*, Kinston, NC

The down-home style of this stew relies on a simple method of layering ingredients, with a final addition of eggs right at the end, making for an unexpected addition to the finished stew. While it's method is straight-forward, it's essential to never, ever stir the stew...despite every urge you'll have to do so.

- 1/2 pound sliced smoked bacon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 3 ounces tomato paste
- 1 pound yellow onions, sliced 1/4-inch thick
- 1 1/2 pounds white or red potatoes, sliced into 1/2-inch rounds
- 1 1/2 pounds fish, cut into 3 ounces pieces (red drum, striped bass, or similar), skin and bones removed
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon chili flakes
- 6 eggs, cracked into individual cups
- 1 loaf white bread

1. In a large pot, add bacon and cook over medium heat until browned, about 10 minutes. Remove and set aside.
2. Add tomato paste to bacon fat and whisk until incorporated, scraping up brown bits from bottom of pan.
3. Remove from heat and begin layering ingredients. Begin with 1/3 of potatoes, followed by 1/3 of onions, followed by 1/3 of fish. Top fish with 1/3 of salt and 1/3 of chili flakes. Repeat with 2 more layers. Fill pot with enough water to just barely reach top of fish. Cover pot and slowly bring to a boil. Do this slowly to prevent stew from scorching. Once boiling, reduce heat and cook at a high simmer for about 15 minutes.
4. When potatoes are tender, taste broth and add more salt if necessary. With stew at a good simmer, add eggs one at a time, in a single layer over top of stew. Once eggs are cooked through, ladle into bowls, including fish, potatoes, onions, an egg, and broth in each serving. Top each with bacon and serve with white bread.

Serves 6.

cook's note: Bones are typically left on the fish to help flavor the broth as it cooks.

salmon chowder

Recipe adapted from Pike's Place Chowder, Seattle WA

- 1 1/2 pounds salmon, skin and bones removed
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 1/2 pounds small red potatoes
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 3 stalks celery (plus some leaves), chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 cup flour
- 4 cups water
- 4 cups half and half or milk (or a combination)
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons capers, drained and rinsed, optional or to taste
- Fresh lemon wedges, for serving

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Lightly grease a baking sheet with a bit of olive. Add salmon and coat top of salmon with a bit more oil. Season with salt and pepper. Roast for about 20-30 minutes until salmon is cooked through. Once cooled, break into large chunks.
2. Meanwhile, in a large pot, add potatoes and enough water to cover by 1 inch. Bring to a boil and cook potatoes until just tender, 15-20 minutes. Drain and rinse under cool water. Cut potatoes in half or quarters and set aside.
3. In a large pot, melt butter. Add onions and celery and cook until translucent. Season with salt and pepper. Add garlic and cook for another minute.
4. Reduce heat to low and stir in flour. Slowly add water, half and half or milk, and tomato paste. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 15-20 minutes, until chowder has thickened. Add salmon, potatoes and capers (if using) and cook until just warmed through, 5-10 minutes. Remove from heat. Spoon into bowls and season with salt and pepper. Drizzle with fresh lemon juice and serve.

Serves 8-10.

cook's note: The original Pike's Place recipe is made with cold smoked salmon or lox (with cream cheese, and capers), and is meant to mimic the flavors of a bagel sandwich.