



I Say Soup ~ You Say Potage & Soupe de Poisson Provençal

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Either – either, tomato – tomato, potato – potato ... For many years, I lived a stone's throw from the French border in Switzerland. A day maybe two, after arriving in Lausanne, I discovered that soup was a lot more than soupe. There was potage and velouté, as well as potage crème velouté. There was bisque but, coming from New England, that was nothing new. I'd heard of consommé but wasn't quite sure why or how it was different from bouillon.

As far as I could figure and now remember, here is a guide to French and Swiss soups:

First, there is Soupe. Except for the silent e, this one is pretty simple. Soupe is any combination of vegetables, meat, poultry and/or fish cooked in a liquid.

Then, there is the aforementioned Potage. At its best, potage is soupe that has been pureed. Think butternut squash, potato and leek or tomato. Sometimes cream, egg yolks or a roux is added to make it creamier or thicker. A potage crème velouté is a super smooth and creamy potage. Sometimes, but not always, a velouté is run through a sieve so it's not just smooth, it's silky.

Within days of my arrival in Switzerland I discovered potage at its worst – Potage de Farine. Unless my memory is playing tricks, Potage de Farine is flour soup. I confess the chef might have been having an off day (I only tried it once) but it was dull and tasteless. If you've ever wondered what gruel is, I'm guessing Potage de Farine is the answer. When poor Oliver timidly asked for *more*, I'm pretty sure Potage de Farine was in the kettle.

Rarely seen on today's menus, Bouillon and Consommé make me think of dinner at Downton Abbey. Bouillon is nothing more than broth made from cooking vegetables, poultry, meat or fish in water. Consommé is bouillon which has been clarified.

According to tradition, Bisque is a wonderfully rich pureed soup made with seafood and cream. Perhaps to appear more elegant, many American chefs have commandeered the name bisque for any smooth, creamy soup. Maybe the recipes have changed (probably not) but a lot of menus list tomato, butternut squash and mushroom soups as bisques.

If they are trying to be fancy, chefs could use the name velouté instead of bisque. Wild Mushroom Velouté or Artichoke Velouté sounds positively elegant. Of course it helps to know that velouté means velvety in French. As far as I can figure, it is just the shorthand name for a Potage Crème Velouté. As delicious as it may sound, Butternut Squash Potage Crème Velouté is quite a mouthful.

During my almost two decades in Switzerland, I sampled a lot of soups in homey cafés and trendy bistros on both sides of the border. Inspired, I set to work in my kitchen developing my own tasty repertoire. I scoured the market for wonderful ingredients, tracked down interesting gadgets and learned new skills. Of course, I didn't hesitate to mix and match my own New England traditions with these new discoveries. One of the good things about being a foreigner, you are not tied to someone else's time-honored tradition!

With the weather turning cold and blustery, there is nothing better than comfortable chair by the fire and a mug of steaming soup. Bon appétit!



Soupe de Poisson Provençal (Fish Soup)

Serve Soupe de Poisson Provençal as a first course at a special occasion or as a main course for lunch or a casual, light supper.

Enjoy!

Serves 8



Olive oil
1 fennel bulb, chopped
1 carrot, chopped
1 stalk celery, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium leek, white and pale green parts only, chopped
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
1/4 teaspoon (or to taste) red pepper flakes
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 medium red skin potato, peeled and chopped
1 cup dry white wine
1-2 cup crushed tomatoes
2-3 quarts fish, shrimp or chicken stock or a mixture
1 bay leaf
2 teaspoons fresh thyme

2 strips orange peel, 4-inches long
1/4 teaspoon saffron threads
2 pounds skinned haddock, halibut or salmon fillet

Garnish: 1-inch thick baguette slices, toasted and topped with Rouille (recipe follows) and freshly grated Gruyère or Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

Heat a little olive oil in a large, heavy pot over medium-high heat. Add the fennel, carrot, celery, onion and leek. Season with salt, pepper and pepper flakes and sauté for about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté 2 minutes more.

Add the wine and saffron; bring to boil. Add the potato, tomatoes, 2 quarts stock, thyme, orange peel and bay leaf and return to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer for 15 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.

Increase the heat to medium-high, add the fish, bring to a simmer and reduce the heat to low. Simmer until the fish is cooked through, about 8 minutes. Remove from the heat and cool for 15-20 minutes.

Remove the bay leaf and orange peel from the pot and, adding more stock if necessary, puree the soup in a blender. Return the soup to the pot and reheat to steaming.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Spread rouille on toasted baguette slices and sprinkle with grated cheese. Arrange on a baking sheet and bake until golden brown, about 5 minutes.

Ladle the soup into bowls, top with the toasts and serve.

The soup can be made a day ahead. Cool to room temperature, cover and store in the refrigerator.



*Another recipe from Susan Nye:
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Rouille

1 cup mayonnaise
3-4 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/4 teaspoon (or to taste) cayenne pepper
Sea salt to taste

Put the mayonnaise, garlic, paprika and cayenne in small bowl, season with salt and whisk to combine. Cover and chill the rouille for 2-3 hours or overnight.