



COOKING

Sicilian Lobster Soup With a New England Twist

Nancy Harmon Jenkins

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A Mediterranean lobster Chef Pino Maggiore uses in his Zuppa di Aragosta, a Sicilian lobster soup recipe. Credit: Nancy Harmon Jenkins

Traveling in Sicily in June this year, I tried as many different versions of Sicilian *zuppa di pesce*,

seafood soup, as I could find. And I found a lot, in a lot of great restaurants that should be on the list of anyone planning a trip to that glorious eater-friendly Italian island. Curiously (or maybe not) all the chefs I encountered had strong ties to Sicily's fishing traditions, and all their restaurants were in towns renowned for their attachment to the sea. Those traditions go back millennia, to the earliest Greeks and Phoenicians, or maybe even to the native Siculi, about whom little is known. The soup itself, apart from tomatoes and chili peppers often added to the stock, probably goes back that far too. Certainly you sense links to both the glorious *kakavia* of the Aegean and the more famous *bouillabaisse* of Marseilles. But this Sicilian soup, in a dozen variations, stands proudly on its own.

At Cialoma in Marzamemi

The first chef I encountered was Lina Campisi at a delightful restaurant called Cialoma (ChalOE-mah) on the piazza of the old fishing port of Marzamemi — also famous for *bottarga*, salted fish roe. Lina's grandfather, she told me, was the last *rais*, the boss, of the local *tonnara* — the Sicilian name for a kind of team-fishing of bluefin tuna when they came into the Canale di Sicilia in late spring. (*Cialoma* is the rather mournful song the tuna fishermen chanted in unison as they hunted the giant beasts.) The old-fashioned fishing is gone, but the traditions remain, and Lina vaunts them: "I learned, since I was a little girl, to recognize the infinite variety that the sea gives us, and how our own wisdom can create an exquisite dish from the most humble fruits of the sea." Her seafood *cuscussu* might look North African at first glance, but it has deep roots here on the island, where it's almost always topped with a broth rich with those humble fruits.

At La Bettola in Mazara del Vallo

Further west, almost at the point where the southern leg of the Sicilian triangle bends around a corner and heads north, is Mazara del Vallo, and the first thing anyone says is: "It looks so North African!" As well it might because many of the fishing boats that come and go hail from Tunisia and Algeria and the town, the largest fishing port in Italy, has that flat-roofed, low-domed, white walled look of Tunisian coastal towns. Here, Pietro Sardo is king of the kitchen at his restaurant La Bettola, and I imagine he gives thanks every morning for the fate that led him one day many years ago to refuse a trip on a fishing vessel to stay behind and cook. The vessel went down, and Pietro would have gone with it because, like most fishermen, he couldn't swim. The restaurant is almost exclusively seafood, although on bad weather days when no fish comes into Mazara's clamorous market, a sign goes up outside: "*Oggi non si mangia pexce*" — No fish to eat today. On good days, his *cuscussu* is made properly, served with a sumptuous broth of *scorfani* — ugly, bony little creatures that give new meaning to the words *trash fish* — mixed with tomatoes, chili peppers, garlic and plenty of white wine and parsley.

At Cantina Siciliana in Trapani

Trapani was my last stop, almost at the northwestern tip of the island, an ancient town on a long narrow peninsula beneath the lofty mountain of Erice. Here, in the old streets of Trapani's ghetto Pino Maggiore's Cantina Siciliana is a humble-looking establishment that is a landmark itself, only this time to the best of the cooking traditions of this bustling seaport with its long connections to North Africa. I always plan to sample Pino's cuscussu because he makes the tender grains himself, gracefully stroking the durum semolina around an antique bowl, adding dribbles of water and oil from time to time. Like most Sicilian cooks, he, too, serves his cuscussu the traditional way, steeped in a rich fish stock with more fish piled on top. But that hot June afternoon, Pino had something else in store — a magnificent *zuppa di aragosta*, made with the spiny Mediterranean lobsters and deliciously thickened with almond flour from sweetly savory Sicilian almonds that have more flavor than any other almonds in the world. Here's his recipe, as adapted by me to make with small Maine lobsters:

Pino Maggiore's Zuppa di Aragosta della Cantina Siciliana

(Lobster Soup from Cantina Siciliana's Pino Maggiore)

Serves 6

The fragrant stock that's the base of this traditional Sicilian fish soup can be made a day or two ahead and kept refrigerated until ready to continue. Then it's just a question of cooking and picking out the lobster and tossing it into the soup along with almond flour, pasta and herbs. Use small trash fish, if you can find them, for the stock. If trash fish aren't available (and they're often hard to find in U.S. seafood shops), ask the fish monger for "heads and frames," meaning the discarded heads and bony skeletons after the fillets have been cut away. An important note: Don't use heads and frames of fatty fish, such as salmon, tuna or mackerel, as they'll give a strong flavor to what should be a delicate but savory broth.

Almond flour, which is basically finely ground blanched almonds, can be found in most health-food stores and at KingArthurFlour.com. A good brand is the almond flour or meal made by Bob's Red Mill. You could also try making your own in a food processor, but commercial brands have better consistency.

In Sicily, Chef Pino uses small Mediterranean lobsters with no claws. He cooks and serves them right in the stew. In Maine, I find it easier to buy 1-pound Maine lobsters with the claws. I steam them in the basic broth, then remove and let them cool before shucking them, discarding the shells and cutting the meat into big chunks to add to the soup. If you want to use an appropriate extra virgin olive oil, look for Titone DOP Valli Trapanesi from groves along the coast south of Trapani — available through Manicaretti importers.

Ingredients

6 pounds of fish for broth (See note above)

3 cloves garlic, crushed with the flat blade of a knife and chopped

1 small onion, coarsely chopped

½ cup extra virgin olive oil, preferably Sicilian from the Valli Trapanesi or the Valle del Belice

2 tablespoons tomato concentrate

1 tablespoon sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Big pinch of chili flakes

1 two-inch cinnamon stick

Small bunch of flat-leaf parsley, coarsely chopped

Small bunch of fresh basil

3 small 1-pound Maine lobsters (with claws)

½ cup almond flour (very finely ground blanched almonds)

Pinch of freshly ground cinnamon

About ⅓ pound of spaghetti, broken into approximate 3-inch lengths

More olive oil for garnish

Directions

1. Rinse the fish and, if necessary, clean the interiors. Cut larger fish into smaller pieces no bigger than the palm of your hand. Set aside.
2. In a soup kettle or stock pot, mix the garlic, onion and olive oil and set over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring, until the onion is soft. Then add the tomato concentrate and a little water and stir over heat to dissolve.
3. When the tomato is completely dissolved, add 3 quarts (12 cups) water to the stock pot. Add the prepared fish with the salt, pepper, chili, cinnamon stick and parsley. Separate the leaves from the stems of basil. Add the stems to the stock, setting the leaves aside to use later for a garnish.
4. Bring the stock to a simmer over very low heat. Cover and simmer gently for 1 hour 15 minutes. When the soup is done, strain it in a fine-mesh sieve or through cheesecloth, pressing down on the fish to extract as much flavor as possible. Discard the fish and other contents of the stock.

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5. When ready to cook the soup, bring the broth back to a simmer. Add the lobsters and cook until they're done. Depending on the size, this can take from 6 to 12 minutes. One-pound Maine lobsters, which you should use for this soup, should be bright red in 6 or 7 minutes. Remove the lobsters when done and set aside to cool until you can handle them, then crack the shells and remove all the meat inside. Set the whole claw meat aside to use as a garnish, if you wish. Otherwise, have all the meat in bite-sized portions.

6. Bring the broth back to the boil and add a generous pinch of ground cinnamon and the almond flour. Stir to mix well and let simmer for 5 minutes or so to fix the flavors.

7. Just before you're ready to serve, add the broken spaghetti to the broth and cook until the pasta is done — about 8 minutes, no more. Sliver the reserved basil leaves.

8. Serve the soup while it's still very hot. Either add lobster pieces to the broth and serve from a tureen; or plate up individual servings, putting a quantity of lobster in the center of each plate, spooning the broth and pasta generously over the lobster and garnishing each plate with a piece of the claw meat and a sprinkle of slivered basil. Finally, drizzle more olive oil on top.

Photo: A Mediterranean lobster Chef Pino Maggiore uses in his Zuppa di Aragosta. Credit: Nancy Harmon Jenkins

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Zester Daily contributor **Nancy Harmon Jenkins** is the author of many books about Italy and the Mediterranean. Her most recent books are "**Virgin Territory: Exploring the World of Olive Oil**," published by Houghton Mifflin in February 2015, and "**The Four Seasons of Pasta**," published by Avery in October 2015.

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