

New England Clam Chowder

What is traditional chowder? The true or traditional chowder is a matter of debate. There are numerous varieties, and each has its loyal following. Just bring up the subject of chowder and most likely a debate will ensue as to which style is the true, authentic chowder. True chowder lovers delight in their pursuit of the perfect chowder, from creamy white to clear and briny to tomato based. Practically every-one claims their chowder is "award-winning."



Chowder has its roots in the Latin word calderia, which originally meant a place for warming things, and later came to mean cooking pot. The word calderia also gave us cauldron, and in French became chaudiere. It is also thought to come from the old English word jowter (a fish peddler).

A simple dish of chowder, in the past considered to be "poor man's food," has a history that is centuries old. Vegetables or fish stewed in a cauldron thus became known as chowder in English-speaking nations, a corruption of the name of the pot or kettle in which they were cooked. Different kinds of fish stews exist in almost every sea-bound country in the world.

Fish chowders were the forerunners of clam chowder. The chowders originally made by the early settlers differed from other fish soups because they used salt pork and ship's biscuits. Today most chowders do not include biscuits, but generally have crackers sprinkled on top. The old-fashioned chowder builder made chowder out of just about everything that flew, swam, or grew in the garden. When the main ingredient is fish or shellfish it is usually called chowder although the term fish stew is also used. Clams, hard or soft, were just one variety of seafood used and were eaten frequently, but there was a certain season for clam chowder and certainly there were other occasions when clam chowder was definitely not served.

Even in New England, known for the Boston or New England-style chowders, you can find different types of clam chowder.

New Englanders use the Native American term quahog. The name quahog derives from the Narragansett Indian name for "poquauhock." The scientific name, mercenaria, of these clams comes from Latin meaning "wages," because Native Americans strung the shells like beads and used them as money or "wampum." Quahogs replace fish in the fish-milk stews of coastal England and France to become New England chowder. Pronounced "chowdah" by people situated north of Connecticut.

In Maine, those living on one side of Penobscot Bay like their clam chowder made with tomatoes, while those living on the other side like it made with milk and no tomatoes. Maine residents often call their region "Down East" and their chowder "Down East Chowder."

By 1836, clam chowder was already well-known in Boston and served at Ye Olde Union Oyster House, the nation's oldest continuously operating restaurant. The building that houses the Union Oyster House is about 250 years old. Daniel Webster, the noted lawyer and

orator who served as a Congressman and as Secretary of State, was a regular at the bar, where he was known for downing a tumbler of brandy and water with each half-dozen oysters--and he'd rarely eat less than six plates of the tasty bivalves!

Western Rhode Islanders prefer clear chowder, while others swear by adding just enough tomatoes to tint it a pretty pink color.

Joseph C. Lincoln (1870-1944), author of 47 books and plays about Cape Cod wrote about New England clam chowder:

A New England clam chowder, made as it should be, is a dish to preach about, to chant praises and sing hymns and burn incense before. To fight for. The Battle of Bunker Hill was fought for--or on--clam chowder; part of it at least, I am sure it was. It is as American as the Stars and Stripes, as patriotic as the national Anthem. It is 'Yankee Doodle in a kettle.'

New England Clam Chowder

Serves 4

- 1 qt. Littleneck Clams, steamed & shucked
- 1 cup Clam Juice
- 1/3 lb. Salt Pork or Bacon
- 1 large Onion, minced
- 2 ribs Celery, minced
- 2 large Potatoes, small dice
- 1 Bay Leaf
- 1/2 tsp. Thyme
- 1 qt. Heavy Cream
- 1/2 cup Butter
- 1/4 cup Flour
- Salt and Pepper to taste
- 1 Tbsp. Butter, chopped
- 2 tsp. Parsley, chopped

Drain and chop clams, reserving liquid. Fry salt pork in a heavy pan until all fat is rendered; add onions and celery and brown lightly. Add butter; melt. Blend in flour and stir constantly for 5 minutes. Whisk in the clam juice and cream. Add clams, potatoes, bay leaf, and thyme. Cook until the potatoes are tender. Ladle into bowls, garnish with butter and parsley and serve.