

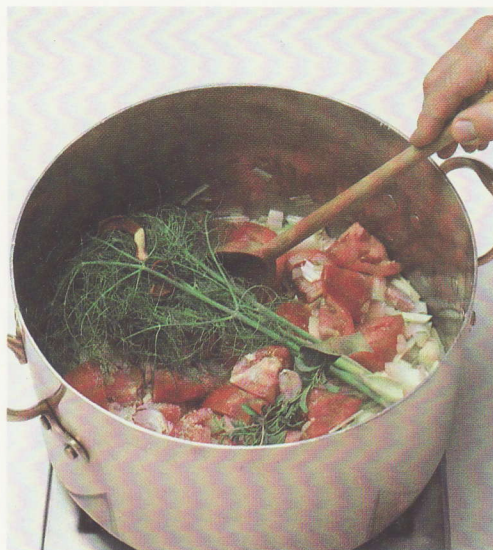
Fish Soup with a Mediterranean Flavour

Because fish have only a small endowment of connective tissue, fast boiling easily breaks up their flesh. Such fragility is a great asset in soup-making: in the *soupe de poisson* shown here (*recipe, page 128*), just a few minutes' vigorous cooking melts the fish flesh into the liquid, to give a broth rich in body and flavour.

The fish—together with aromatic vegetables, tomatoes and seasonings—is initially boiled vigorously, to strip the flesh off the bones, then simmered more gently lest any solids stick to the pan. After about 30 minutes, the soup is strained to produce a shimmering fish essence—thinner than a purée, but with a density lent by the minuscule particles of fish that pass freely through the sieve. The aromatic vegetables and the remains of the fish are discarded.

Many versions of *soupe de poisson* are found in Mediterranean lands. The version demonstrated here is distinguished as a Provençal speciality by the addition of garlic, saffron, stalks of fresh or dried fennel and the dried peel of Seville oranges. Locally, the soup is made with a mixture of small rockfish: mullets, wrasses and gurnards, for example. If these are not available, you can substitute a mixture of any lean fish—such as sea bass, whiting, plaice, halibut, haddock or cod. As an economy, supplement portions of large fish with a few fish carcasses and trimmings.

Noodles, boiled separately then added to the soup for the last minute of cooking, give more body to the broth. In Provence, *soupe de poisson* is traditionally garnished with either noodles or croûtons and served with *rouille* (*box, far right; recipe, page 166*), a mixture of olive oil, garlic, sweet red pepper and hot chili peppers blended into a thick, lustrous sauce.



1 Stewing the vegetables. Cover the bottom of a large saucepan with olive oil. Over a medium heat, stew sliced leeks and onions; whole, unpeeled garlic cloves and chopped tomatoes. Season with salt, a bay leaf, savory, dried Seville orange peel and fennel. Reinforce the fennel's flavour, if you like, with a splash of pastis—anise-flavoured spirit.



2 Adding the fish. Clean the fish and cut them up. After about 10 minutes, when the tomatoes have softened, add the fish—here, whiting, sea bass and two sole carcasses. Increase the heat, then add boiling water to cover the fish. Boil vigorously for a few minutes, stirring and prodding with a wooden spoon to break up the fish and extract the flavours.



4 Cooking the pasta. Home-made noodles (*page 17*)—here, flavoured with saffron—must first be parboiled in water so that any loose flour left clinging to them will not cloud the soup. Bring the pan of water to a rolling boil and add salt and a spoonful of olive oil to prevent the pasta ribbons from sticking together. Drop in the noodles (*above, left*), boil for 1 to 2 minutes, then drain them in a colander. Slide the pasta into the soup (*above, right*).