

Asheville Seafood Restaurant Gets Saucy!

When talking of seafood, especially here in the south, sauce is sure to be mentioned. It doesn't matter whether cocktail or tartar, fried or broiled, sauce is always a delicious dunking condiment.

Asheville seafood restaurant owners George Baxevanis and George Vlahos know all about cocktail sauce. At their place, Fisherman's Quarters II, they make it by the gallon. Baxevanis says, "We just can't make enough of the stuff."

We all know it, we all eat it and I'm sure most, if not all of us, can make it. But what is it? Where does it come from?

To find the answers I had to wade through mounds of anecdotal evidence. Everyone has a recipe, most similar, but very few have any real information. Wisps of details, like the smell of shrimp on the boil, led me far and wide. Both are modern forms of classic preparations and both are as individual as the cook who makes them. The ingredients are ordinary; the list is a seemingly simple concoction of common household foods. But when you add them all together a sweet tart spicy hearty sauce of seafood delight is born.

Cocktail Sauce

The origins of cocktail sauce are rooted in the naval tradition of England but the name comes from the time of American Prohibition. While alcoholic cocktails were outlawed, food "cocktails" became popular menu items.

Fruit Cocktail and Shrimp Cocktail are two examples. The classic shrimp cocktail is chilled shrimp in a martini glass with "shrimp cocktail sauce." Basically, cocktail sauce is tomato ketchup, chili sauce, lemon and horseradish.

Cocktail sauce itself started as a native American dish. It was a simple sauce of crushed tomatoes and chili, much like salsa. After the discovery of the Americas, the pairing was used in many other cultures. For instance, in Mexico, they make Pescado Veracruzana, fish baked with chili and tomato sauce. And, sailors from every country, not just England, learned that spicy tomatoes make seafood taste good!

Sailors have been using ketchup a long time, but not the one you're thinking of. The first ketchup came from south Asia and was called "ke tsiap." It was made from vinegar and another flavor such as nuts, mushrooms or even fermented fish. British sailors loved the pungent sour flavor because it masked the taste of spoiled food. And, when tomatoes were discovered to prevent scurvy, they were quickly added to the ketchup itself. Chilies, pepper and horseradish were soon added to the mix and the rest is cocktail sauce history.

Basic Cocktail Sauce

- 1 cup Ketchup
- ½ cup chili sauce
- 1 Tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 Tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 Tablespoon horseradish, or more if you like

Hot Fish, Cool Sauce

The origins of tartar were just as elusive as cocktail. It has cousins, namely remoulade, Thousand Island, Louis sauce, and mayonnaise. Regardless, no fried fish is quite right without some tartar sauce. The tangy smoothness naturally enhances the crispy hot taste of a perfectly fried piece of fish.

Tartar sauce is made by mixing chopped pickles, onions, lemon and other flavorings to mayonnaise. Served on the side for dipping or directly on the food, it has become a staple of fish fries and seafood restaurants.

What really makes tartar sauce a challenge to track down is that mayonnaise, the base, is hard to track. At least four sources, ranging from duc de Richelieu to the village of Mahon claim the honor. Whatever the original source, we know mayonnaise comes from France and was used to garnish seafood. It was also used as the base for some other sauces that are close cousins to tartar sauce.

Quick Tartar Sauce

- 2 cups real mayonnaise
- ½ cup dill relish, drained well
- 1 Tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all together and refrigerate until needed.