A Word on Stocks, Soups, & Poaching

Stocks

Stocks can be defined as a thin liquid (usually water) simmered with ingredients such as bones, vegetables, and an array of other seasonings, to extract their flavors.

Bones: lend both flavor (from marrow and flesh scraps) and thickening power (in the form of gelatin). The more cut up the bones, the more surface area in which to extract flavors. Roasting bones adds depth of flavors and colors from Maillard reactions. Connective tissue (collagen) and cartilage are great sources of gelatin. Knuckle, neck, shank, and major joint bones are great for stock making. In general, the larger the bones, the longer the cooking time and thusly, the larger the cut of the mirepoix vegetables (to help keep them from breaking down to far).

Mirepoix: classic French flavoring base; consisting of 2 parts onion, 1 part carrot and 1 part celery; a flavorful and aromatic blend of vegetables cut into smaller or larger cuts depending on the length of cooking time. You can make your own variation of mirepoix with vegetables of your choosing to customize the flavors of your stocks. Vegetables to avoid are those from the crucifer family (such as cabbages, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and cauliflower); they create sulfur smells and flavors when overcooked.

Other Flavorings: a variety of other ingredients such as fresh or dried herbs and spices can be used to enhance the flavors of a stock. The only ingredient to never use is salt; when a stock is reduced for many different culinary uses it could easily become too salty.

Skimming "Scum": while a stock simmers, impurities will rise to the surface creating a gray "scummy" looking foam. Discarding the scum foam, by skimming off the surface with a ladle or large spoon, will not only help keep your stock free of unwanted ("off") flavors, but will also help to keep it clear; the small particulate matter in the foam can give a stock a cloudy appearance.

Straining: after a stock has simmered long enough to extract all the flavors out of the ingredients, it is time to remove those ingredients. To have a smooth, pure, and clear stock, straining it through a fine mesh strainer (such as a chinois) lined with cheesecloth is the best option. These many layers of fine mesh and cloth will ensure that the smallest particles, as well as all the large pieces of ingredients, are removed.

Fatting: many meat bone stocks will have a layer of liquid fat develop on top. The amount of fat remaining on the bones used in the stock will determine how large a layer it will be. You may choose to leave this layer on or not, depending on your individual tastes or health concerns. When the stock is still warm you can use either a fat separator or a beverage dispenser (with the pour spout on the bottom of the unit) to remove the fat. Once the stock has chilled the fat layer will become solid (which can be used as an air barrier while storing it) and it can be easily removed.

Storing: a stock can be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week or frozen for up to 4 months. It should be cooled to at least room temperature before being either refrigerated or frozen. A warm stock can heat up the refrigerator or freezer, potentially spoiling the other foods inside, and by wasting energy by overworking the motor to cool the unit back down. To cool it quickly it can be place either in an ice bath in the kitchen sink or in front of a draft (from an open window or a fan).

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Soups

Soups come in 3 major types, thin or clear soups, creamy soups, and purees. Soups can be one of these styles or a combination of two or all three.

Thin/Clear Soups

- ***Broth:*** flavorful liquid, usually stock enhanced by simmering with flavoring agents to extract their flavors, then straining.
- ***Vegetable Soup:*** seasoned stock/liquid base with vegetables, meats, noodles, or other starches and flavorings.

Creamy Soups

- ***Roux Thickened****:* uses roux (roughly equal parts of fat and flour cooked together) either at the beginning or end of the cooking process to thicken the soup and give it a velvety/creamy texture and mouth feel.
- ***Creamed with Dairy*:*** milk, half & half, cream, yogurt, sour cream, etc. (or other dairy like liquids such as coconut or soy milk) can be added to just about any soup. Dairy product can be simmered, but not boiled; the high temperature will curdle them (coagulate the proteins) just as acids will.

Purees

Hot Purees: pureed using a blender or emersion blender.
Cold Purees: produce, cooked legumes or other starches pureed with liquid using a blender or emersion blender.

Consider Adding:

- ***Meats:*** precooked and raw meats should be added towards the end of the cooking process and *poached* in the simmering liquid. Adding too soon can lead to tough and overcooked textures.
- ***Seafood:*** add to the soup towards the end of cooking process, *poaching* it in the simmering liquid. Note: that mollusks (mussels, clams, etc.) need to be added to the soup at the end, but at a boiling temperature, and cooked just until the shells open. The high heat of the boiling liquid will help to counteract the refrigerator cold temperature of the mollusks.
- ***Pasta, Grains, and Dumplings:*** they can be precooked and added to the soup for the last few minutes of cooking; or added them to the simmering soup at the proper time so that they are just cooked through when the soup is ready. For example, adding dry pasta about 10 minutes before or rice 15 - 25 minutes before the soup is done.
- ***Legumes (beans, lentils, etc.):*** when adding precooked (or canned) legumes to a soup, you can either add them at the first half of cooking if you would like them to help thicken the soup (since they are already precooked they will break down and simmering will help to add a thicker texture), or add them to the soup towards the end of the cooking process if you would like them to hold their more firm and whole texture. If adding raw legumes to a soup, their cooking time needs to be considered. Large beans can easily take an hour or more of simmering to cook through, while lentils can be perfectly tender in 20 minutes or so.

Poaching

This technique is usually used on proteins, both meats and seafood. It is to gently simmer (never boil) them in a flavored liquid (or even just water) until just cooked through and tender.