

Trout Lacombe



by Jason Clevenger

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One afternoon I chalked “Trout Lacombe” on the right side of the waiter’s blackboard—the side for the night’s specials.

I knew three things about the dish. There would be trout. There would be crawfish tails. And it would be named Trout Lacombe. It was unusual for me to baptize a dish with a proper name. I tended towards simple stylings, like “Shrimp and Squash Bisque”; not quite a brand, more a list of key ingredients. But in this case, I had been inspired by someone—Chris

Kerageorgiou, the chef/owner of the transformative La Provence on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain near the town of Lacombe. The problem was I didn’t have a recipe.

You might think that chefs map out new recipes to the last soupçon of salt, then rigorously test and refine before the final dish shows up on the night’s special. As a brash, twenty-something-year-old chef, that was not my jam. Chris had created an au gratin of luscious tails amid bubbling cream and crawfish fat with a whiff of vermouth and a bit of a crunch from seared breadcrumbs. I wanted to take that idea and liven up our prosaic sautéed trout.

A waiter asked what the dish was. I said it had trout and crawfish. He asked how it was prepared. I said he would have to order one to find out. He asked how he should describe it. I said tell the diners it would be good. He scowled. I shrugged.

One of my strengths was cooking à la minute—preparing sauces to order rather than in advance and holding them.

I was counting on that strength to come up with something new and delicious, but if all I came up with was trout with crawfish and cream sauce, it would still be pretty yummy.

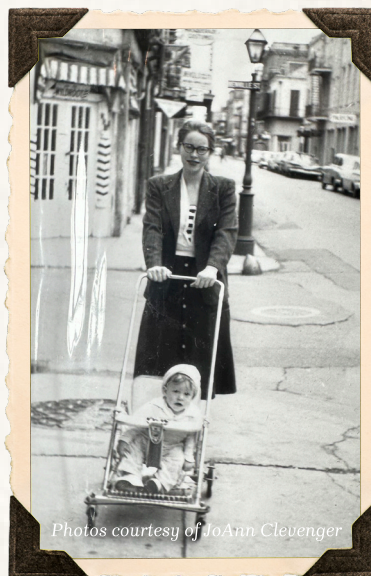
Not long after we opened, Scowling McWaiter came back to the kitchen and called out for two Trout Lacombes. I put two sauté pans, one large and one small, on the stove and added clarified butter to each—one for the

Trout Lacombe was created in spring of 1982 while I was the chef at Cafe Sbisa, where it quickly became a popular special. I included it as part of the regular menu when we opened the Upperline in 1983.

trout and one for the sauce. I started sweating some green onions and mushrooms in the small pan. Then I dredged the trout fillets in egg wash and seasoned corn flour and lowered them into the hot oil sizzling in the large pan.

I added the crawfish tails and their precious fat to the onions and mushrooms, gave the small skillet a flip, and stared down. I would add the cream in a minute. But I needed something distinctive. I had read that people in Wisconsin were second only to Louisiana in crawfish consumption. I also read that they were first in the nation in brandy consumption. In went a splash of brandy, which made it better, but I felt it still needed a kicker. In addition to crawfish and brandy, Wisconsin also has Swedes—there is probably a causal connection lurking among those three facts. I recalled (courtesy of the great Time Life series of cookbooks) that Swedish crawfish dishes used dill as the main spice profile.

Into the small skillet went heavy cream and dill; I added a few dashes of Tabasco® for a little bit of acidity (and heat) to counter the richness from the fat. I cranked up the heat to reduce the sauce, flipped the trout, and in a couple of minutes plated the fish and draped the crawfish over the top. The fat produced a rosy tint to the cream which provided a nice background for the pale green slivers of dill. I added a spoonful of sauce and with a piece of bread to finish the dish and pushed it over to the waiter. The scowls turned to smiles. A new dish was born.



Photos courtesy of JoAnn Clevenger

Me with my mom circa 1960

Trout Lacombe

30 Minutes
Serves 2

Plating

Plate the fish, then spoon sauce and crawfish over the fish. Serve immediately.

The sauce is better if it is made to order at the same time the trout is cooking. You need good prep and some technical skill to pull this off, especially if there are other things going. So, no worries if you do the sauce first then cook the fish.

The dish scales up with how much fish you can cook at the same time. If you have a very large skillet, you can cook for four.

Modern sensibilities cringe at the amount of butter and cream. You can reduce butter by poaching or baking the fish. You can also remove the cream and keep the heat lower. Add a couple of tablespoons of stock or water to keep the mixture moist.

Replace the regular mushrooms with chanterelle or oyster mushrooms.



Trout

Egg wash (1 egg mixed with a 2 Tbl of milk or water)

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup corn flour (not cornmeal), seasoned with 1 tsp cayenne pepper and 1 tsp salt.

Heat a medium to large skillet—something large enough to hold the fish comfortably—over a medium to high heat. Add the clarified butter.

Dredge the trout through the egg wash and then through the corn flour, alternating hands to keep one wet and one dry.

Lacombe Sauce

1 Tbl clarified butter

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green onions

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sliced mushrooms

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup cooked crawfish tails with fat (see Notes on Ingredients, below)

Place a small sauté pan over medium heat and add a tablespoon of clarified butter to melt.

Add the green onions and mushrooms and sauté.

Add the crawfish tails and their fat and continue to sauté for another minute.

Carefully add the brandy, being sure to hold your head back from the flame.

Notes on Ingredients

The star of the show is the crawfish tails with their fat. These are available fresh in 1-lb bags in New Orleans markets most of the year. You can find them frozen in parts of the country.

2 trout fillets, about 6 oz each, or substitute other thin white fish

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup clarified butter

When the butter is hot, gently place the fish into the skillet. Don't drop them or you will splash hot oil.

Two minutes after turning the fish with a fish turner or spatula, push aside the seam on the fish to reveal the trout flesh. If it's white, it is done. This is usually another minute or two.

1 tsp brandy

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream

1 tsp dill

3 to 4 dashes Tabasco®

Once the flame dies down, add the cream, dill, Tabasco®, and a pinch or two of salt.

Turn the heat to high to bring to a quick boil. Then lower the heat and simmer until the sauce thickens (about 2 minutes). Do not overcook. You can turn heat off while cooking the fish, then gently reheat the sauce prior to serving.

Back in the day, the fat did not seem to freeze well and the result was not as good. I don't know if that is still true.