

Oyster Stew with Toasted Benne Seeds

Southern-style oyster stew is simple, often nothing more than freshly shucked oysters warmed in hot milk. This stew recalls a Low-Country tradition of adding benne seeds, which are an heirloom sesame seed. The fragrant seeds, along with judicious seasoning, ensure the stew is flavorful without overwhelming the oysters. Add the oysters just before serving, and take care to not overcook them. When the edges curl like Elvis's lip, they're ready.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

6 tablespoons benne seeds or unhulled sesame seeds
1 pint freshly shucked oysters with their liquor
2 ounces smoky bacon, diced
2 small scallion bunches, whites trimmed and chopped (about 1/2 cup) and some of the greens thinly sliced for garnish
1/4 cup rice flour or all-purpose flour
1 1/2 to 2 cups high-quality bottled clam juice, seafood stock, or chicken stock, as needed
1/2 cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil, plus more to taste
Juice of 1/2 lemon
Kosher salt and ground black pepper, to taste
Hot sauce, to taste
Garnish with: reserved cooked bacon, scallion greens, and lemon wedges
Serve with: buttered saltines or oyster crackers

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Spread the benne seeds in a shallow layer on a rimmed baking sheet and bake only until you can smell their fragrance, about 10 minutes. Keep an eye on them because they can go from perfectly toasted to scorched in seconds. Pour onto a plate to cool. (Leaving them on the hot pan can cause them to burn.) They will continue to darken as they cool.
2. Drain the oysters and collect their liquid (known as oyster liquor) in a large measuring cup. Refrigerate the oysters until needed. Add enough clam juice to the liquor to total 2 1/2 cups of liquid.
3. Cook the bacon in a large saucepan over medium heat until browned and crisp, about 12 minutes, stirring often. Transfer the bacon to a bowl, leaving the fat in the pot.
4. Stir the chopped scallion whites and a pinch of salt into the bacon fat and cook until tender, about 3 minutes, stirring often.
5. Sprinkle the flour over the scallions and stir to coat. Cook for 2 minutes, stirring continuously.
6. Stir in the oyster liquor mixture. Cook until smooth, bubbling, and thick, about 8 minutes, stirring slowly and continuously.
7. Stir in the toasted benne seeds and the cream. Cook only until the stew begins to steam; do not boil.

8. Taste the stew and add toasted sesame oil to taste. It's strong, so start with 1 teaspoon, and then add more if needed. The idea is to enhance the flavor of the toasted seeds.
9. Add the reserved oysters and cook only until their edges begin to curl, 1 to 3 minutes, depending on their size. Remove from the heat.
10. Stir in the lemon juice. Season with salt, pepper, and hot sauce. Quickly ladle into serving bowls and garnish with the bacon and scallion greens, with lemon wedges and crackers on the side.

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