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Beer as an Educational Tool?

By Chef Dan Leff

I recently taught a class on cooking with beer. A dozen students, all men, comprised the class. They walked in with the expectation of getting a little learning, a fair amount of good eats, and a lot of beer. They left with much more than that. Here's how things shaped up....

Appetizers –

Spicy Shrimp, Teriyaki Chicken Wings

These appetizers were quick and easy to make. The guys were pleasantly surprised that they weren't just handed a jug of teriyaki glaze to season the wings – I had them prepare the glaze using soy sauce, sugar, and some lager beer. We used Michelob for the glaze – we saved the fine micro-brewed bock beer for drinking purposes. These dishes paired well with ice-cold Anchor Steam. Anchor Steam is the only beer of its kind – it's made using lager yeast, but is fermented at higher temperatures than a lager.

Main Course -

Jambalaya with Wild Rice

There was no way of avoiding the usual arguments over “how much garlic, how much cayenne,” etc., but the boys settled their culinary differences in a quick and good-natured manner. Some Bass Pale Ale added complexity to this dish. The Bass mellowed out some of the spices, while adding a hint of bitterness that kept the dish from being too heavy. Not surprisingly, Bass accompanied this dish nicely.

Side Dish –

Broccoli Rabe with Garlic

Not too many of the men had seen broccoli rabe (also called rapini) before. With an appearance that lies somewhere in between American broccoli and Chinese broccoli (Gai Lan), it's a misunderstood vegetable. It's quite bitter, as well – I had to explain that even though we lost some nutrients by poaching it as long as we did, we also lost most of the rapini's harshness. I originally planned to match this with a malty hefeweissen, but the end product was mellow enough to go with any of the lagers or pale ales served that night.



About Chef Dan Leff...

After graduating from the CA Culinary Academy in 1995, I've worked in venues around the Bay Area. Having worked with Bradley Ogden at the Lark Creek Inn, I specialize in Classic American cuisine, using seasonal ingredients, with a fine dining emphasis.

Chef Dan Leff Catering focuses on intimate, elegant sit-down dinners and small corporate events. <http://www.chefdanleff.com>, email: ChefDanLeff@aol.com, phone: 510-530-1243

Dessert –

Fallen Chocolate Cake

Not “fallen” in the Biblical sense, but actually a cake with a fair amount of meringue in it that settles down when it cools. I was never as proud as when I heard these rowdy guys painstakingly evaluating the peaks of the meringue, gently mixing the batter, and punctually reminding one another to “Check the cake, dude; make sure it's baking okay.” I originally planned on serving the dessert with Guinness Stout, but one guy surprised me – he brought some Kriek Lambic (a Belgian cherry-flavored beer) and served it to everyone at the end, in little aperitif glasses. Lambic is a style specific to Belgium – wild yeast alone is used to ferment the beer. It's similar in concept to our own San Francisco Sourdough bread.

At the end of class, the guys all tucked into a hearty, hand-crafted meal. The sound of forks clinking against plates served as a backdrop to intense table-side discussions of all they'd learned during the evening.

Cajun Jambalaya with Wild Rice

Makes 10 servings

4 tablespoons olive oil or rice bran oil
3 lbs smoked ham, cut into ½" dice
3 lbs andouille sausage, cut into ¼" thick slices
2 green bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½" dice
1 large onion, small diced
5 stalks celery, small diced
5 cloves garlic, minced
6 cups light beer (preferably pale ale)
3 cups chicken stock
4 cans diced tomatoes (28-oz. per can)
3 tablespoons Cajun Seasoning (see note on right)
1 bay leaf
2 6-oz. cans tomato paste
6 cups wild rice, pre-cooked in pressure cooker
Salt, to taste

Note: Cajun Seasoning can be purchased, but it's more satisfying to make one's own blend at home. This seasoning consists of dried oregano, dried thyme, garlic powder, onion powder, ground black pepper, ground white pepper, cayenne pepper, and mustard powder.

1. In a large soup pot, heat the olive or rice bran oil over medium high heat. Add the ham and sausage – cook, stirring frequently, until the meat just starts to stick to the bottom of the pot. Add the garlic, bell peppers, onion and celery, and cook, stirring frequently, until the vegetables are softened (about 10 minutes – the onion and celery will be opaque).
2. Add the beer, stock, diced tomatoes, Cajun Seasoning, and bay leaf to the pot. Bring to a boil, then lower heat to medium-low and simmer (stirring frequently) for 15 minutes. Add tomato paste and cooked wild rice, stir to mix thoroughly. Continue to simmer, stirring all the while, for another 15 minutes.
3. Adjust seasonings – add salt and more Cajun Seasoning (if needed). Discard bay leaf and serve.

Beer Pairing –
Bass Ale
(or other pale ale)

