



SAN FRAN in a pan

In San Francisco, **Serena Renner** gets her chops around *cioppino* stew and finds herself falling hook, line and sinker.

Photography by **Serena Renner**

A COOL BREEZE ROLLS OFF THE OCEAN AT SAN FRANCISCO'S Fisherman's Wharf. It's 18°C but the chill in the air makes it feel colder. It's typical weather for July, and ideal conditions for slurping down *cioppino*.

Cioppino (chuh-pee-noh) is San Francisco's answer to *bouillabaisse* or *burridda*, a tomato-based seafood stew that arrived here with Italian fishermen in the mid-nineteenth century. These fishermen, most of them from Liguria, would combine their leftover catch with whatever ingredients they had at sea, mostly canned tomatoes and wine. Eventually, the stew moved off the boats and into the Italian restaurants of North Beach before returning to Fisherman's Wharf. Today, between colourful souvenir shops and statuesque street performers, visitors can find restaurants named after some of the oldest Italian families: Castagnola's, Tarantino's and Alioto's. Adjacent to the California Shellfish Co. sits a restaurant simply called Cioppino's. It's a fitting place to have my first taste of the namesake dish.

Despite living in the Bay Area for five years, I have somehow avoided the famous fish stew. I wondered if it had become a cliché, reserved only for the most touristy of waterfront eateries, or whether locals embraced the soup, too.

"The fishing culture is alive and well," says Taryn Hoppe, as we sit down for lunch at a red-and-white chequered table. Taryn is a fourth-generation San Franciscan and the daughter of Nick Hoppe, who opened Cioppino's in 1997.

Taryn summarises the history of *cioppino*, which is also printed on the restaurant's menu. "Back when it was called Meiggs' Wharf, the fishermen would pull their boats in for the day and pool together all the seafood they couldn't sell. Someone would go around calling for



leftovers to throw into a pot, saying 'chip in, chip in'. That morphed into chip-ee-no [the 'in' is pronounced with an Italian accent]."

Others say the name is derived from *cioppin*, which means 'to chop' and 'little soup' in Genoa, the capital of Liguria, home to a similar seafood concoction.

A shallow red bowl loaded with mussels, clams, shrimp and half a Dungeness crab appears in front of me. Before I know it, I'm cracking legs and wiping my mouth on a white bib emblazoned

1850s. At this point, I still can't tell whether *cioppino* is a tired tradition served mainly to out-of-towners or a staple as popular now as it was 165 years ago. I seek out Tadich Grill, which dates to Bazzuro's day, for inspiration.

"Our *cioppino* is the most popular dish," says general manager David Hanna. "On any given night, a third of the restaurant's entrée sales are *cioppino*."

Hanna says they butcher the fish on site, and little goes to waste. "The tail ends aren't

“Before I know it, I’m cracking legs and wiping my mouth on a white bib emblazoned with the outline of a crustacean and the word ‘CRAB’.”

with the outline of a crustacean and the word 'CRAB'. Spooning deeper into the bowl, I discover flaky snapper and springy calamari swimming in the broth laced with fennel, chilli and parsley. My Anchor Steam beer and sourdough from Boudin Bakery are the perfect accompaniments.

A few hours later, I meet Richie Alioto at the longstanding Fisherman's Wharf establishment that his great-grandparents Nunzio and Rose Alioto opened in 1925.

Alioto's started as a seafood stall, where the family would stoke a fire under the crab pot with coal or wood, mostly feeding the local fishermen who would come in to trade or get their catch cooked by 'Nana Rose'. Rose's *cioppino* grew out of that tradition, and the recipe hasn't changed since the early days, Richie says.

The dish is rich with a spicy finish. I ask Richie what's his secret. "I usually don't share it," he says, "but I will. We take a crab and crack it live, then sauté it right into the sauce. Some people get mad about that, but all the flavour comes from inside the shell. We call it butter. Tomato sauce is tomato sauce; it's what you eat on pasta. This is something else."

The next day, I find myself on the border of the financial district, not far from where Genoese immigrant Giuseppe Bazzuro first popularised *cioppino* at his eponymous restaurant in the

appetising to look at on a plate, but they're still very edible and we can use those in *cioppino*. You can put anything in it," he says. It occurs to me that the reason for *cioppino*'s invention – to save wasting the local catch – might also be reason for its survival.

For my final meal, I head to Pesce, a 14-year-old *cichèti* (Venetian tapas) bar located on upper Market Street. The modern interior features white walls, light timber floorboards and a subtle nautical vibe exaggerated by a Japanese-style fish mural in the back. It's not the kind of place that would offer a bib with its *cioppino*.

I order a single version of the shared *cioppino* special. I'm told Pesce can't keep it off the blackboard menu. I understand why as I sop up the final puddle of broth at the bottom of my terracotta dish. It's simple yet modern, with meaty chunks of fresh rock cod and strong notes of saffron and green capsicum

"We're not reinventing the wheel," chef-owner Ruggero Gadaldi tells me when I ask about his recipe. "It's hard to erase so many years of history. When people think about San Francisco, they think about sourdough bread, they think about seafood on the wharf."

Cioppino keeps those traditions alive. It's little wonder it retains such a warm place in the hearts (and tummies) of locals. ☺



CIOPPINO (recipe courtesy: Pesce)

Serves six

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 brown onion, diced
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
- 1 green capsicum, diced
- 1 red capsicum, diced
- 4 cups fish/shellfish stock
- salt and white pepper to taste
- 800g can chopped tomatoes
- pinch saffron
- pinch chilli flakes
- 18 clams
- 18 black mussels
- 12 large green prawns
- 450g cod
- 2 tablespoons chopped basil
- 1½ tablespoons chopped Italian parsley
- 2 tablespoons grated parmesan
- 85g fresh crab meat

METHOD

Heat olive oil in a large saucepan. Add onion, garlic and capsicums and cook for five minutes, stirring occasionally until the vegetables soften slightly. Stir in the stock, salt, white pepper, tomatoes, saffron and chilli flakes. Bring to boil and simmer for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, place the clams and mussels in a bowl and rinse under running water for 10 minutes. Strain and set aside. Peel and devein prawns and set aside. Dice the cod into 2.5 centimetre squares.

When the base is ready, add the seafood, except the crab. Bring to the boil and cook for three minutes or until the clams and mussels open. Stir in basil and parsley. Sprinkle with parmesan and a pinch of fresh chopped parsley.

Divide *cioppino* into bowls, topping each dish with a spoonful of crab meat. Serve with a slice of sourdough.