

Oysters Rockefeller

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Malcolm Hébert, cookbook author, former food and wine editor of the San Jose Mercury News, and a gentleman of fine Louisiana stock, has this to say about this classic New Orleans dish:

This is one of the most sought-after recipes in the world. Even the ex-employees of this restaurant won't talk about how Antoine's Oysters Rockefeller are made. The closet recipe to the original was developed by Roy Alciatore, one of Antoine's previous owners, for Life magazine's The Picture Cookbook, published more than 30 years ago. While this recipe has spinach in it, I was told by Bernard Guste of Antoine's that the original recipe does not have spinach in it.

Roy Guste Jr., current fifth-generation proprietor of Antoine's, will still not give out the original Oysters Rockefeller recipe as it's still prepared at Antoine's, and it is not included in the Antoine's Cookbook. Hey, I heard the secret was green onions, not spinach ... let's give that a try with what's the best recipe I've yet come across (which makes a lot of sense), and then we'll reproduce the one to which Malcolm referred above. I bet ya like da foist one mo' betta.

This recipe purports to be a close version of one that supposedly came directly from Jules Alciatore, Roy's father. (It looks way, way better than the one that Roy supplied to Life.) Rather than using bunches of spinach, that so many of the recipes we've seen floating around, it has lots of herbs plus celery leaves, which is true to the rumor that Jules created the dish out of what happened to be lying around the kitchen, including scraps. It seems to me that the secret of this dish is the herbs -- tarragon, of course, and chervil. Use the freshest herbs you can find, and by no means ever used dried herbs for this dish.

Ingredients

Two dozen fresh oysters on the half shell, oyster liquor reserved
4 springs flat-leaf Italian parsley
4 green onions (including the green part)
A handful of fresh celery leaves
At least 6 fresh tarragon leaves
At least 6 fresh chervil leaves
1/2 cup dried fresh French bread crumbs (homemade, not out of a can)
12 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened (hey, it's supposed to be "rich enough for Rockefeller"!)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
Tabasco or Crystal hot sauce, to taste
2 tablespoons Herbsaint or Pernod (optional)
Rock salt or kosher salt

Method

Mince together the parsley, green onions, celery leaves, tarragon and chervil as finely as you possibly can. Take as much time as you need. Mince them more finely than anything you've ever minced in your life. Mix this together with the bread crumbs and the softened butter into a mortar and mix the whole thing together into a smooth paste, but do leave a little texture to it. (You can do this in a blender or food processor, but you'll leave a lot of it behind, stuck to the inside, and it'll be just easier to do it by hand in a mortar; you'll have an easier time getting it all out, and you'll have the satisfaction of serving something truly hand-made.) Season to taste with salt and pepper, Tabasco or Crystal and, if you like, the Herbsaint.

Preheat your broiler. Lower the top rack to the middle of the oven. Spread the rock salt (preferable) or kosher salt over a large baking sheet; this will keep the oysters level under the broiler, so that they won't tip over. Moisten the salt very slightly. Plant the shells in the salt, making sure they're level. Place one oyster in each shell, plus a little bit of oyster liquor. Spoon an equal amount of the prepared herb/butter mixture over each oyster.

Place the baking sheet on the middle rack and broil until the edges of the oysters have curled and the herb butter is bubbling, about five minutes. Watch carefully to make sure you don't overdo it. Serve immediately.

YIELD: Six servings of four oysters each (regular people-sized serving), or four servings of six oysters each (New Orleanian-sized serving)

Roy Alciatore's Oysters Rockefeller

(as published in Life magazine's cookbook)

Ingredients

36 fresh oysters on the half shell
6 tablespoons butter
6 tablespoons finely minced raw spinach
3 tablespoons minced onion
3 tablespoons minced parsley
5 tablespoons bread crumbs
Tabasco sauce to taste
1/2 teaspoon Herbsaint, or substitute Pernod
1/2 teaspoon salt

Method

Melt the butter in a saucepan. Add all the ingredients except the oysters. Cook, constantly stirring for 15 minutes. Press the mixture through a sieve or a food mill. Cool. Line six pie tins with rock salt. Set 6 oysters in the rock salt on each pie tin. Divide the topping into 36 equal portions. Place one portion on each oyster. Broil until topping is brown. Serves 6.

(Many thanks to Christopher Hébert for providing the recipe and his father's articles.)