



Sharon Smyth

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Inspiring a lifelong love of fresh fish

TRAVEL TO THE SLANEY RIVER VALLEY to visit Tullow, and you'll find yourself in the midst of a rich agricultural landscape. Along the way, there are sites of great antiquity dotted amongst the fertile fields; mysterious remnants of times long past in the form of ancient stones and prehistoric ring forts.

Arriving in the old market town of Tullow itself, with its long history of commerce it follows that the Market Square is the focal point, with roads radiating outward. Walk five minutes from the square down Mill Street, and there, nestled by the grassy banks of the Slaney, you'll find a spot known for its way with fish. At the Riverbank Restaurant, proprietor Sharon Smyth champions an ethos of farm- (and quayside) to-fork cuisine.

Sharon remembers growing up in a busy household and recalls her family's connection to the local land. "I was born into a family of 10 children up on the highlands of The Ridge, Old Leighlin. My parents worked as farmers, including dairy."

But Sharon's mum also gave her family a taste of the county next door. "Mum is a native of Wexford where fish is served seven days a week, so that tradition came with her to Carlow when she married my dad and set up home on The Ridge. This recipe also made the journey, being handed down from my nana to my mum."

Though this speciality in particular was imported, other dishes had an origin much closer to home. "There was always a smell of baking and cooking in Mum's kitchen, and much of the produce used was homegrown and reared right on the family farm." Mealtimes were also occasions to sit down and catch up: "Dining out in our family was very rare. We had a large dining table where we all sat together to eat, where many stories were told, laughs were shared... and even heated discussions were had!"

With so many mouths to feed, childhood exposure to the practical aspects was inevitable: "Being from such a

large family, we learnt how to cook at an early age; later on, as I progressed in my career I appreciated more and more what my Mum had taught me. Her huge passion for home cooking and baking has followed me into my own business now as a restaurateur."

In making the most of the valuable skills learned at home, Sharon also sustains her mum's love of the bounty from Ireland's rivers and coasts. "Not only is this recipe — with its fresh fish, chunky vegetables and touch of cream — one which evokes forgotten memories for me; but I also believe it can be an inspirational dish for others. It would be great to encourage more people to cook and enjoy fresh fish, one of the easiest things to prepare.

"When placed in the middle of the table beside a basket of freshly baked bread, this traditional chowder brings everyone together, and adds the wonderful taste of the ocean to our family dinners here in lush, grassy Carlow County."

Difficulty: Easy to intermediate

Prep: 15 mins / Cook: 25 mins

Makes: 4 servings; 2 adults and 2 children



Mum's Seafood Chowder

"Equally good on a wet winter's day or in glorious summer, fresh fish is so delicious in its simplicity. My Mum is an amazing cook; she always had a one-pot wonder on the table, and this chowder was one of her many specials."

Ingredients

- ♦ 2 tsp olive oil
- ♦ 2 leeks finely sliced
- ♦ 550g potatoes peeled and chopped into small cubes
- ♦ 1 large carrot finely diced
- ♦ 1L fish stock
- ♦ zest of 1 lemon
- ♦ 330g frozen peas
- ♦ 500g skinless boneless fish chopped (hake, whiting, salmon, smoked haddock; pre-made fish mix is perfect)
- ♦ 500g fresh mussels in shells
- ♦ 250g raw prawns or shrimp (available in the supermarket prepared and ready to cook)
- ♦ 2 tbsp double cream
- ♦ 1 tbsp fresh parsley chopped

fresh baguette for serving

Method

- 1 Heat the oil in a large pan, add the leeks and fry lightly for 5 minutes until soft but not brown. Add the potatoes and carrots and cook for a further 2 minutes.
- 2 Pour in fish stock, add lemon zest and simmer until the potatoes and carrots are tender.
- 3 With a slotted spoon remove half the potatoes, carrots and leeks from the stock and set aside.
- 4 With a hand-held blender, carefully blitz the remaining ingredients until smooth (caution: it will be very hot).
- 5 Add the peas and remaining vegetables back to the pot and bring to the boil.
- 6 Turn down the heat and add chopped fish, fresh mussels and prawns.
- 7 Bring back to the boil, then simmer for 4–5 minutes until the mussels are open.
- 8 Stir in cream and chopped parsley; season with salt and pepper to taste.
- 9 Transfer to a large serving bowl and serve with a freshly baked baguette.

See recipe tips on pg 55.



Recipe tips

Fish stock can be made in large batches and frozen in 1L tubs for convenience.

Fish stock cubes can be used; just taste before seasoning with salt as these are pre-seasoned.

Many supermarkets now sell vacuum-packed fish that's skinned, chopped and pin-boned which is ideal for this dish.

Fresh mussels are amazing; SuperValu and Dunnes Stores stock them.

The lemon that was used for zesting can be juiced and the juice added in just before serving, giving the dish an extra freshness.

Most of all, enjoy this amazing chowder with family and friends!

