

Rotary Fun in the Sun/Beach Bash Low Country Boil

Low Country Boil - it conjures up delicious images of shrimp and other goodies piled high on a picnic table while dozens of friends line up to scoop up their favorites... spiced sausage, red potatoes, sweet corn and onions and of course shrimp cooked to perfection in a spicy boil concoction that you can smell from a football field away. Nearby are roaring propane burners and massive pots turning out this traditional coastal dish to the masses.

It's a social event and time honored tradition in the low country along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts. Friends gather close together and share a communal meal... not necessarily an ideal meal during a global pandemic.

So our goal is to ditch the propane tanks and 20 gallon pots and size this dish down to a two person meal without losing any of the character or taste that comes with the full Low Country Boil experience.

As it turns out, this is completely doable, and in fact you can control some of the inputs and outcomes better on the stove top than you can in a roaring 20 gallon pot, most importantly avoiding overcooking the shrimp.

Have you ever been to a large Low Country Boil, and everyone is raving over the sausage and potatoes as the best things in the dish? Sometimes that is because the shrimp are overcooked and rubbery. *Avoiding overcooked shrimp is our top priority in this recipe.*

Also, fear not if you have an allergy to shrimp, this recipe will offer some options that are just as tasty without the risk of a trip to the emergency room... keep reading.

Rotary is International... so is Low Country Boil

For generations wherever there is a coast or local fish available, various cultures have been cooking locally available ingredients quickly in seasoned water or broth. In Louisiana, it is a crawfish boil. In the Chesapeake Bay and further up in New England, crab and seafood are prepared in ways that take advantage of the local bounty and flavors. Norwegian immigrants brought the tradition of fish boils with them when they settled in Wisconsin and the upper Great Lakes region. In Asia, "Hot Pot" traditions go back thousands of years where seafood and other ingredients are quickly cooked in seasoned broths and liquids.

Some say that the Gullah-Geechee people of the low country brought with them African cooking traditions mixed with Spanish and French influences, and these practices evolved into the dish we now call Low Country Boil. In the 1960s, the dish grew in popularity after Robert Gay, from the area of Frogmore, South Carolina, devised an efficient way to feed 100 fellow National Guardsman by adapting an old family recipe. This dish became known as Frogmore Stew. It is also known as Tidewater Boil or Beaufort Stew or Boil depending on where you live in the low country.

All of these traditions have one thing in common. Take fresh local ingredients and cook them relatively fast in a highly seasoned base liquid. Let's get started!

The Equipment

We're not going to need propane burners and 20 gallon pots, and we don't need to keep the fire department on speed dial.

This is a dish for two people so an 8 quart pot will do just fine. If you want to size it up to serve 6 or 8, it is recommended that you start out with a 10 or 12 quart pot to accommodate the extra volume.

You will also need a slotted spoon, or a colander for draining and a knife for chopping. A one quart measuring container, instant read thermometer and soup ladle come in handy too. That's about it.

The Base Liquid & Spice

To keep things simple, this recipe calls for one gallon of base liquid for the boil. That is enough to cook this two person meal or enough to size it up for additional people.

Spice is imparted to a low country boil in two ways. First is the initial spice and flavorings you add to the water. The second way is how long you let the dish soak after everything is done. This recipe keeps the soaking time consistent (ten minutes) while adjusting the spice according to taste. If you soak too long, the dish starts to cool off and becomes less appetizing.

This recipe uses Old Bay Seasoning. It is a very traditional ingredient all along the coast, and it is widely available. You can, however, use any seasoning you like. There are plenty of other crab and shrimp boil seasonings available in most grocery stores. Pick what you like, read the instructions and determine the right amount for one gallon of water. The thing I like about Old Bay is that it brings a subtle heat to the party while adding lots of other great flavor profiles.

To the one gallon of water, we will add four smashed garlic cloves, one-half lemon and - here's the tricky part - between 1/4 to 1/2 cup of Old Bay Seasoning. This really is dependent on your taste and sensitivity to heat. I find the 1/2 cup amount to suit my taste very well, but it does end up being pretty spicy after the soak and by the time you finish eating. One-third cup backs the heat off and 1/4 cup makes it pretty mild. Keep in mind, you can always add dry seasoning to the finished dish on the plate to add some spice if you are wanting more. You can always add spice... you can't take it away once it's cooked in. If you decide to go with 1/4 cup, you might consider adding some salt to taste because the Old Bay seasoning has the only salt we are adding to this dish.

The Proportions

Again, this is a meal originally designed for two people. For each person, plan on 1/2 pound of shrimp, 1/4 pound of sausage, 3 small red potatoes, one quarter sweet onion and one ear of corn broken in half. Double this for two people, quadruple it for four people and so on. If you go much beyond 6 people or so, you should consider sizing up the water volume and pot size. The key is that you need to have enough liquid to easily cover all the ingredients when they are combined, and you want to have enough volume of water so that you don't slow the cooking process very much when you add each ingredient in stages.

The Process

First you get the seasoned boil base heating towards a boil. As it begins to boil, add the potatoes. If they are very small, this step only takes around 8 minutes. If they are much larger, you might have to increase the time up to 15 minutes. You don't want to finish cooking the potatoes in this first step... they will finish cooking as other ingredients are added.

At all times, try to maintain a heavy simmer or near boil.

Next add the quartered onion and sausage and continue cooking for about 6 minutes.

Then add the corn and cook for an additional 6 minutes.

Next is the most important step. All of the previous ingredients are pretty forgiving; shrimp are not.

Have a one quart measuring container standing ready nearby full of ice.

Place the shrimp into the main pot and cook for about 2 minutes. You can tell that they are done when the shrimp turn fully pink and lose their translucency. This is usually around 2 minutes. If the shrimp are really big (10 count per pound for example) you might let them cook for another minute or two. The average size shrimp you see in the grocery stores are usually around 21 count per pound, and two minutes is all they need to be done.

When the shrimp are done, carefully dump about a quart of ice into the main pot. The goal is to get the temp down to about 140 degrees rapidly so that the shrimp stop cooking, and you can let all the ingredients soak for 10 minutes. An instant read thermometer can give you a quick reading of whether you've hit the sweet spot of 130-140 degrees. Just add ice and mix until you get to that temp. If you don't have a thermometer, you can tell when the water feels about as warm as bath water to the touch. When the temp is right, put a lid on the pot and wait ten minutes.

After the soak, scoop the ingredients out with a slotted spoon or pour into a colander and transfer to serving dishes.

Didn't you say something about shrimp allergies?

If you can't have shrimp, you can easily substitute a firm white fish like grouper instead of shrimp. Cut the fish into nuggets about 1-2 inches wide. Larger pieces might take about 3 minutes to cook, but they finish in about the same time as shrimp. Mahi Mahi would work too, but I would avoid thin flakey fish or oily fish like salmon.

Other Ingredients? Get Creative

This recipe uses very basic traditional ingredients. There is no reason you can't add other things like carrots, cauliflower or cabbage wedges... really any produce you like that lends itself to a simmering boil. I've seen all of those added to traditional low country boils on the coast. In most cases, dense vegetables like these could be added when the onions go in. Let's face it, it's hard to mess it up. All of these things taste great raw. They will be even better cooked in a fabulously seasoned broth. I've even seen chicken wings added in some parts of the Georgia coast.

The Recipe

(Serves 2 people - increase amounts of potatoes, sausage, onions, corn and shrimp to serve more)

For those who plan to cook along with us, please make sure that you have the first four ingredients in the recipe in the pot at a boil when the virtual live production starts or you will not catch up with Chef Mike and Gary. There is not enough time to do the whole dish if you aren't ready when the show starts.

1 gallon of water
4 cloves of garlic, smashed
1/2 lemon for boil liquid, more for squeezing on finished dish if desired
1/4 to 1/2 cup of Old Bay Seasoning to taste
6 small red potatoes
1/2 pound of smoked sausage sliced
1/2 sweet onion (skin removed and quartered through the root end so that it remains intact)
2 ears of corn (cut in half to make four pieces)
1 pound of shell-on shrimp

Combine water, garlic, 1/2 lemon and Old Bay Seasoning and bring to boil. The pot should be at least 8 quart size, larger if you are trying to serve more people. In this recipe, the water will come up half way

in an 8 quart pot, and there will be plenty of room to add ingredients. If you have a 10 or 12 quart pot, by all means use it. The extra space will not hurt a bit

Add potatoes and cook at heavy simmer, near boil, for 8 minutes. If potatoes are large, continue cooking up to 15 minutes.

Next add the sausage and quartered onions. Continue cooking for 6 minutes.

Add the corn and cook for 6 minutes.

Add the shrimp (or fish) and cook until done - 2 minutes for average size shrimp. If the shrimp are extra large, you can add a minute or two to the cooking time. If using fish, larger pieces of fish could be cooked around 3-4 minutes. The fish is more forgiving than the shrimp.

When shrimp or fish are done, quickly and carefully add the ice to the main pot and stir. One quart of ice should bring the temperature of one gallon of liquid down to around 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Check the main pot with an instant read thermometer. Add more ice in small amounts if needed. The goal is to reduce the temp below 140 degrees without cooling it so much that the dish is cold when served.

Cover the pot and let soak for ten minutes.

Remove ingredients with a slotted spoon or pour into a colander. Serve immediately.

A note about Sauces and Serving: traditional sauces include cocktail sauce, a remoulade or tarter sauce.

Don't miss the opportunity to make my favorite and easiest sauce. Right before you add the shrimp, ladle out 1/2 cup of the seasoned liquid and pour into a bowl with 3 tablespoons of butter. By the time the dish is served, the butter will be melted and the flavors combined. This mix is packed with flavor and is perfect for dipping shrimp and pouring over the corn and potatoes for extra flavor.

Keep in mind you can sprinkle Old Bay or other seasoning over any of the ingredients on your plate if you want a little more spice.

Buttered garlic bread is a good accompaniment too.

Sit down and enjoy a dish that has a fascinating local cultural history and international roots that go back for thousands of years. What could be more appropriate for a Rotary Meal?