

Our State eats

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Chef Vivian Howard's Eastern Carolina Fish Stew

Yield: 12 servings.

- 1 pound sliced smoked bacon
- 1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste
- 3 pounds white or red potatoes, peeled and sliced into ½-inch rounds
- 2 pounds yellow onions, peeled, halved, and cut into ¼-inch slices
- 6 garlic cloves, sliced (optional)
- 3 pounds fish steaks, about 3 ounces each, with bones intact (red drum, rockfish, or sheepshead are good options)
- 1 fish head, rinsed well (optional)
- 2½ tablespoons salt
- 1½ teaspoons chili flakes
- 1 dozen eggs
- 1 loaf white bread

Cut the bacon slices into 1-inch squares. Brown it in the bottom of an 8- to 10-quart Dutch oven or cast-iron pot. Once it's crisp, remove it and reserve. Whisk the tomato paste into the bacon fat, making sure you scrape up all the bits left from browning the bacon.

With the heat off, begin layering the ingredients. Keep in mind you want to end up with three layers. Start with a layer of potatoes, followed by a layer of onions and of garlic, if using, followed by a layer of fish. Top the fish with a third of the salt and a third of the chili flakes. Repeat with two more layers. Fill the pot with enough water to just barely reach the top of the fish. If there's a little fish peeking out over the top,



that's ok – better than if it's swimming in water. Cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid and bring it to a boil slowly over medium heat. Once it starts to boil, reduce the heat and let it cook at a high simmer for about 15 minutes. Check the potatoes for doneness. They should be barely tender, not falling apart.

Taste the broth and add more salt if needed. Then, with the stew at a good simmer, add the eggs one by one in a single layer over the top of the stew. I like to crack the eggs into a small cup before I drop them in. What you're trying to do is cook whole eggs in the broth. Once the eggs are cooked through, use a large ladle to portion the stew. A proper serving is at least one piece of fish, two potatoes, some onions, and an egg swimming in broth. Shower each bowl with some bacon and set it up with a slice or two of white bread.

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