

Corn Chowder

Thick, chunky chowder has always been a humble food made with whatever is around. In its early years in North America, that meant seafood, such as cod or haddock, added to a base of salt pork and onions. By the mid-19th century, the homey soup had moved steadily inland, where cooks eliminated the fish and added ingredients straight from the farm: milk, cream, potatoes, and butter. It was probably only a matter of time before another ordinary ingredient, an American original, found its way into the chowder pot: corn. In short order, creamy corn chowder, born in New England, was a classic from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters. BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA

Poring over corn chowder recipes, I saw that the list of ingredients had made its way through history almost unchanged: corn, salt pork or bacon, chopped onions, broth, cubed potatoes, and milk or cream. The cooking method—which I followed myself—hadn’t changed either: Chopped onions are (and were) sautéed in salt pork or bacon fat. Everything else is (and was) added and simmers together until the vegetables are tender. So I was surprised when five recipes I tried (including one of the first ever to appear in print, from *Mrs. Lincoln’s Boston Cook Book* of 1884) produced noticeably different chowders. Not one delivered everything we sought in ours, namely: velvety texture; unambiguous corn flavor; plentiful, plump kernels; and, since it was summer, delicacy.

I combined the best features from the two recipes we liked most and was about to start my testing when I happened to find a *Good Housekeeping* recipe from



1888 that used a dozen ears of corn (most recipes called for three to six ears). Aha! Use more corn, get more corn flavor. Hopeful, I made the recipe, scraping 12 ears into my soup. The chowder was packed with kernels. Unfortunately, it lacked the silken, full-flavored base I sought.

To start building that base, I returned to my combined working recipe and tested salt pork versus bacon. Tasters preferred the sweet smokiness of the bacon. Next, to add depth, I sautéed the fresh kernels (with the chopped onions) in the bacon fat. Test kitchen experience taught me the technique should add toasty, slightly caramelized flavors to the corn, and by extension the chowder, and it did. As long as I had tasters at the table, I had them taste chowders made with different types of potatoes. They preferred red potatoes, which retained their shape in the chowder and added a pretty gleam of pink.

To thicken the chowder, I tried the standard roux, a paste of cooked flour and butter. It was a little heavy for summer, but it worked, as did cornstarch. I thickened a third pot of chowder with pureed potatoes. That was also acceptable, though my chowder was veering into potato soup territory. I couldn’t resist trying Common Crackers, called for in several old recipes. These dense New England crackers resemble the hardtack sailors ate on long ocean voyages and probably used to thicken fish chowder. I crushed saltines, the closest match I could find. My curiosity was satisfied, if not my palate: The broth had the texture of soggy paper napkins.

Amid all these possibilities, I couldn’t let go of an idea I had to use the corn to both thicken the chowder and intensify its flavor. I blended a few cups of fresh kernels with some chicken broth (the base of my soup). Even when I let the blender run for almost