

Boiling Points

We look at the traditional Door County fish boil, plus how a Milwaukee restaurant puts its own spin on the recipe.

BY LAURA BENGIS

Door County fish boils—a tradition dating back to the 1800s—are a beloved tradition among Door County tourists. “You come up here, you have a fish boil,” says Larry Krause. He and his wife, Tammy, own the Old Post Office in Ephraim, a restaurant housed in a restored building once home to Ephraim’s post office in the 1900s.

The Old Post Office is one of several Door County locations that offers an outdoor evening fish boil. Patrons sit among kettle-side benches as Boil Master Jeremy “Torch” Klaubauf prepares a community meal over an open flame. A favorite portion of the evening, Krause says, is when Klaubauf shares the history of the fish boil and Door County while cooking the fish.

“The short story is, it originated in lumber camps because it was an easy way to feed a lot of lumberers easily,” Krause says.

While community camaraderie is a key component of the fish boil, Krause says with a stovetop and large stock pan, home chefs can get pretty close to recreating this Door County classic at home.

As an aside, sourcing whitefish has been difficult in recent years, Krause says. “We’ve been running day-to-day on fish—we’re always chasing fish,” he explains. “It’s been that way now for a few years, but the worst we’ve seen was early in the season.”

Whitefish like cold water, so when Wisconsin experienced heavy winds in May and June, the warm water was near the bottom and the cold water on top, Krause says, scattering the whitefish from their usual spots.

Traditional Fish Boil Ingredients

- Fresh lake whitefish. Locally-caught whitefish (weighing about 3-3.5 pounds) is the star of the traditional Door County fish boil. The fish are laid flat and cut into steaks, yet the unique bone structure holds this fish together as it cooks in boiling water.

- Bill Reiber, retail store manager of Empire Fish in Wauwatosa, stocks Lake Superior whitefish year-round. It’s sourced from a number of vendors throughout the year, but home chefs can expect to pay a current market price of about \$11.99 per pound for whitefish filets or \$7.99 per pound for whole cleaned whitefish.

If you’re unable to find whitefish, Reiber says walleye could be a suitable substitute. Trout (or any fish that you can steak) can also be an acceptable replacement, Krause says. Consistency can vary by fish, so if needed, Krause says fish can be placed in a cheesecloth bag if the bone structure has been removed or if the bone structure won’t support boiling the steak on its own.



In selecting portions, Krause recommends budgeting about one pound per person (about two pieces of fish).

- Small Spanish onion. A little bit bigger than a golf ball, they are ideal for the fish boil, Krause says. He suggests a specialty grocery store or food market to find onions of this unique size.

- Red potatoes. Fish can be paired with any type of potato, Krause says, but red potatoes are served in the traditional boil, noting that it’s important to cut and remove the ends of the potatoes before cooking to ensure that the salt penetrates the potatoes and adds flavor.

- Salt: Because it’s the only real seasoning giving the traditional boil its flavor, Krause says home chefs needn’t be shy when adding salt.

Preparing The Fish Boil

A simple stock pot over the stove is an easy, controllable alternative to the 22-gallon cauldron over an open fire that the Old Post Office uses. In Door County, some hardware stores sell fish boil kits with a small kettle and basket, essentially smaller versions of tools used at commercial fish boils.

continued on page 40



Pan and Dana Hompluem of Milwaukee’s Low Country restaurant. Photo by Laura Dierbeck.

continued from page 39

The Old Post Office uses a big basket with holes for the potatoes and onions, then a smaller basket with holes on top to hold the fish. The basket allows the food to be lifted from the water and drained easily, but Krause says the same effect can be accomplished at home by dropping items into a colander to drain.

Ingredients can be prepared in the amount of time it takes for the water to boil. If purchased whole, fish need to be cut into steaks. Potatoes should have ends removed and onions need to be peeled.

Cooking The Fish Boil

Cook times for the boil are pretty standard, but should be adjusted based on the size of the ingredients, Krause says. Potatoes should cook for 30 minutes, onions should cook for 20 minutes, and fish should cook for 10 minutes.

Serving The Fish Boil

After removing fish, potatoes, and onions from the water, they’ll need to dry. Once dry, they’re served on a plate and the fish and potatoes are covered with melted butter. The fish will also need to be deboned before eating.

The Old Post office serves a side of coleslaw and homemade bread: pumpkin, lemon, zucchini or rye. Lemon bread goes especially well with the fish, yet rye is a traditional pairing, Krause says. Meals should be finished with the traditional fish boil dessert, he notes: a warm slice of cherry pie made from Door County cherries.

The Low Country Method

At Milwaukee’s Low Country, a create-your-own seafood boil restaurant located in the former Bar Louie space on Water Street, customers can build a boil with a combination of proteins, sauces, heat levels, and sides. Owner Pan Hompluem says he fell in love with the low country boil (frogmore stew) from Beauford, S.C., and started hosting backyard fish boils with portable stock burners. While

preparation of a low country boil resembles a Door County fish boil, a low country boil incorporates more versatility in ingredients and flavors.

While whitefish is a protein option, Hompluem says other choices like crab, shrimp, lobster tail and mussels may be easier to find locally. For the home chef, he recommends Costco as an affordable option. Finding and cooking shellfish in their whole state (with shells on) will better protect the protein against the boiling water, Hompluem notes.

In addition to red potatoes and onions, Hompluem recommends experimenting with corn, sausage, green beans, or broccoli in a boil.

Unlike the whitefish boil, he recommends cooking different proteins separately to account for the varying cooking times. In addition to salt, he’ll add other flavorings to the water like apple juice, orange juice, or lemongrass.

After removing all vegetables and proteins from the water, put ingredients into a large plastic bag or bowl and add seasoning. Hompluem says Old Bay seasoning mixed with garlic and butter is a great place to start, but there are many options for seasoning or saucing a boil. The key is to mix well, getting into the nooks and crannies of the proteins. **MKE**

Door County Fish Boil

This is the standard version of a Door County fish boil.

Ingredients

- 2 lbs. Lake Superior whitefish
- ½ lb. red potatoes
- 2 small Spanish onions
- ½ cup salt
- ¼ cup melted butter

Instructions

- Add ½ cup of salt and 4-6 quarts of water in a large stock pot. Bring to a boil.
- While the water is coming to a boil, cut the fish into 4 steaks. Remove the ends of the red potatoes and peel the onions.
- Once the water is boiling, add the potatoes. The boil will take a total of 30 minutes to cook; ingredients will be added every 10 minutes. After the first 10 minutes, add the onions, and 10 minutes after that, add the fish. The potatoes will cook for a total of 30 minutes, the onions will cook for a total of 20 minutes, and the fish will cook for a total of 10 minutes.
- When all ingredients are cooked, remove from the water with a slotted spoon or pour them into a colander to drain. Plate the ingredients, then cover the potatoes and fish with melted butter.
- Serve with coleslaw and bread. Finish with a slice of cherry pie for dessert. Serves 2.

▼ Go to www.iddelafield.com to learn more about this sponsor. ▼

SPONSORED BY



I.D. DELAFIELD:

A modern American kitchen in the heart of Wisconsin’s Lake Country, I.D. entices guests to try something new with its selection of chef-inspired dishes, craft cocktails and extensive wine list. The restaurant’s unique vibe and bold, shared-plates menu make I.D. the ultimate dining experience. Reserve your next night out or special occasion at I.D. Inside the Delafield Hotel. www.iddelafield.com