

Learning to clean and cook a squid

Good Seasoning — Special to Home & Family

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The other day, I learned how to clean a squid.

It's been squid season around here — the time of year when the Longfin Squid swim in from the Gulf Stream to the warming waters of Nantucket Sound and Cape Cod Bay. Alex has been getting boatloads into his fish market, and when I told him I was curious, he brought home four pounds, un-cleaned.

I had absolutely no idea what to do.

Luckily, he knows a thing or two about fish. The next day we cleaned out the sink and dumped in the squid, and he talked me through the process. Alex grabbed a squid and arranged it purple side up, head and crazy tentacles to my right and smooth fins spread wide to my left. He told me to press down on the squid's back with my forefinger and to feel around until I found something unyielding, hard. That was the cartilage, he said, and I would need to take it out.

He showed me a point at the front of the squid's back — the funnel — and told me to put a finger on either side of it, press down on the flesh with my left hand, and gently scrunch the skin around the point back toward the fins. The cartilage would break through, he explained, and from there it would be easy: simply grab the cartilage, and pull.

I have never seen anything quite like what emerged. Fishermen call it the cuttlebone, but it looked more like a flimsy piece of Plexiglas or plastic to me. It reminded me of the sort of material you'd use to manufacture a drinking straw, or maybe a lemonade cup. It was long, thin, and hard.

From the cuttlebone it was on to the guts. Alex told me to reach inside and grab anything that wasn't part of the body tube. I got what looked like a belly and maybe an intestine, and then the ink started running out. The sink turned a deep, jet-black as the thick paste spilled down the drain, and it stained my nails and fingertips.

I cut off the head and rinsed out the body, and just as I went to set the squid aside, Alex said we had one more step. He showed me how to peel off the skin — how to find a spot where it seemed disconnected from the body, and how to gently give it a good, slow tug. All the color came off: all the purple speckles, all the tinges of pink — even the fins were connected to the sheet.

When we were done, what was left was a tube: a wiggly, hollow, pinkish-colored tube closed in a point at one end, and open at the other. All said and done, the whole process had only taken about two minutes.

Then, of course, it was on to the cooking: we stuffed the tubes with crushed spinach and oregano and basil from our garden, sewed them up with toothpicks, and simmered them in white wine and garlic for a half hour before digging in. The stuffing spilled out into the broth, the squid tendered up beneath out forks, and before I knew it, our plates were clean.

The fishmongers in Portland told me they can't pinpoint exactly when you might get squid in Mid-coast Maine. It comes in when there's extra from the Cape or Rhode Island in the spring, but also sometimes in July and August off local boats. Whenever that day rolls around, I wanted to make sure you'd know what to do.

Braised Stuffed Squid

Squid are perfect for stuffing. Once you've cleaned them, they're still closed at one end, which means you can pack a few spoonfuls of herbs and crackers and cheese in the open end, and use a toothpick to sew them up.

The texture gets better with slow braising, so I like to stuff my squid, pan sear them, and then lower them into a hot pan of white wine and fish stock for a half hour or so to tender up. Most of the stuffing stays inside the squid, but the little bits that spill out do a brilliant job of flavoring the broth.

- 1 and 1/2 ounces fresh basil
- 1 and 1/2 ounces spinach
- 1/2 ounce fresh oregano
- 2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 cups cracker crumbs (preferably from a buttery cracker like Ritz or Carr's Rosemary)

- 6 large squid, cleaned
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 3/4 cup white wine
- 1 and 1/2 cups fish stock, preferably homemade

Pulse the basil, spinach, oregano, Parmesan cheese, and cracker crumbs together in a food processor until the herbs are in flecks. This is the stuffing; spoon it into each squid until the cavities are about 3/4 of the way full. (Don't overstuff the squid, or they will explode.) Use a toothpick to close the open ends of the squid cavities, and set the stuffed bodies aside.

In a large, heavy-bottomed soup pot, heat up 2 tablespoons of the oil over medium-high heat. Sauté the garlic for 30 seconds, or until it starts to color and get fragrant, then deglaze the pan with a third of the wine. When the liquid has reduced by half, add another third, reduce again, then add the remaining third. Reduce again and add the fish stock; turn the heat down to a simmer.

Heat up the remaining oil over high heat in a large cast-iron skillet. When the oil and the pan are HOT, add the squid and sear for a minute on each side. Turn off the heat under this pan and transfer the squid to the pot with the fish stock. Cover and simmer for 30-45 minutes, or until the squid are soft and tender. Serve the squid hot, with a spoonful of liquid over top.

Elspeth Hay grew up in Brunswick and now lives on Cape Cod. She works with local food in a variety of mediums — from writing to photography to radio to, of course, cooking, too. You can find more of her stories and get in touch at www.diaryofalocavore.com.