



Gefilte Fish

For many people gefilte fish is the epitome of traditional Jewish cooking. It was served on Shabbat and other high holidays in the shtetl, the small towns in Eastern Europe shaped by Jewish culture. Housewives procured a living fish, usually a carp, which was then killed at home. They cut open the fish's belly in such a way that they could remove the bones and meat without tearing the skin. After mixing the meat of the fish with matzo meal or white bread, they filled the fish skin with the farce. This way, one fish was enough to satisfy the whole hungry family. Since cooking is not permitted on Shabbat, the dish was prepared before it began and eaten cold.

Even though gefilte fish can be found in all varieties of **Ashkenazi** cuisine, there were two distinct ways to prepare it in Eastern Europe, separated by a clear geographical line. In southwest Poland, Galicia, and German-speaking regions, people preferred to eat their gefilte fish sweet. By contrast, the so-called Litvaks, Jews from Lithuania and other regions under Russian influence, favored gefilte fish seasoned with salt and lots of pepper. As a Jewish family genealogist half-jokingly observed, you can tell from the way people like to eat their gefilte fish where their family originally came from!

This is Joan Nathan's recipe for gefilte fish. She is the author of the well-known cookbook "Jewish cooking in America".

For about 26 patties:

- 7–7½ pounds whole carp, whitefish, and pike, filleted and ground*
- 4 quarts (liter) cold water or to just cover
- 3 teaspoons salt or to taste
- 3 onions, peeled
- 4 medium carrots, peeled
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 small parsnip, chopped
- 3–4 large eggs
- freshly ground pepper to taste
- ½ cold water
- ⅓ cup matza meal

* Have your fishmonger grind the fish and ask him to save and give you the tails, fins, heads, and bones. The more whitefish you add, the softer your gefilte fish will be.

Ashkenaz, old Hebrew word for the region encompassing Germany, northern France, northern Italy, and later also for Eastern Europe; Ashkenazi Jews, or Ashkenazim, are the Jews who descended from the Jewish inhabitants of these areas.

Instructions:

Place the reserved bones, skin, and fish heads in a very large wide saucepan with a cover. Add the water and 2 teaspoons of the salt and bring to a boil. Remove any foam that accumulates.

Slice the onion in rounds, add along with 3 carrots and the sugar, and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer for about 20 minutes while the fish mixture is being prepared.

Place the ground fish in a bowl. In a food processor, finely chop the remaining onions, the remaining carrot, and the parsnip; or mince them by hand. Add the chopped vegetables to the ground fish. Add the eggs, one at a time, as well as the remaining teaspoon of salt, pepper, and the cold water. Mix thoroughly and stir in enough matzo meal to make a light soft mixture that will hold its shape. Wet your hands with cold water and, scooping up about ¼ cup of fish, form the mixture into oval shapes about 3 inches long. Take the last fish head and stuff the cavity with the ground fish mixture.

Remove the onions, skins, head, and bones from the saucepan and return the stock to a simmer. Gently place the fish patties in the simmering fish stock. Cover loosely and simmer for 20–30 minutes. Taste the liquid while the fish is cooking and add seasoning to taste. Shake the pot periodically so the fish patties won't stick. When the gefilte fish is done, remove from the water and allow to cool for at least 15 minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, carefully remove the gefilte fish and arrange on a platter. Strain some of the stock over the fish, saving the rest in a bowl.

Slice the cooked carrots into rounds cut on a diagonal about ¼ inch thick. Place a carrot on top of each gefilte fish patty. Put the fish head in the center and decorate the eyes with carrots. Chill until ready to serve. Serve with a sprig of parsley and horseradish.

