

Clam Chowder with Corn and Bacon

Serves 6–8

Chowder, as a word, is not my favorite, but I do like the concept. A sort of brothy mishmash of ingredients in a pot, almost always potatoes, alliums and some sort of seafood but occasionally corn. Here, it's both. Seafood (clams) for brininess AND corn for sweetness, AND a little bacon for a meaty smokiness (optional), gently simmered together. One might say that's non-traditional or perhaps even too much but I'll take both as a compliment because frankly, they're tough to ever separate once you've experienced together. I will say if you have one and not the other (say, clams but not corn, or maybe you don't eat bacon), this recipe still works, because I'm nothing if not flexible.

There aren't really any tricks to this recipe and it's nearly impossible to mess up— the hardest part is finding, soaking and scrubbing the clams (please don't forget to soak and scrub the clams), then all the knife work you'll be doing: chopping the vegetables and removing the corn kernels from the cob. From there it's basic sauteing, simmering. The classics. I will say my one caveat to all this praise: if you're expecting a thick, gloopy experience, you've come to the wrong place. There is no roux here, no flour, no blending. This clam chowder is more of the brothy, soupy, light and ethereal variety, ideal for the end of summer and beginning of fall, but would happily take you into the winter months, too.

Ingredients

5 lbs. clams, such as Littleneck, Manila, New Zealand, or a mix

6 ounces slab or sliced bacon, cut into ½” pieces (can also substitute 4 tablespoons unsalted butter or olive oil)

4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced or finely chopped

2 large leeks or 1 large yellow or white onion, chopped

Kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper

4 celery stalks or 1 fennel bulb, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced (celery leaves reserved if you have them)

3–4 ears corn, kernels removed

1½–2 pounds potatoes (Yukon gold preferred but any type is fine really), cut into 1” pieces

4 cups heavy cream

1 fresh or dried bay leaf (or a few sprigs of thyme), optional

Parsley, Saltines, hot sauce and/or lemon wedges, for serving

Instructions

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1. Soak your clams in a bowl of cold water. Let them hang out here as long as possible—up to the night before (in the fridge), if you think of it, but at least 30 minutes.
 2. With the water gently running, use a clean kitchen scrubber to scrub the clams, focusing on the hinge (not the opening) and ridges of the shell, where most of the grit and sand lives. Change the water so they're sitting in a bowl of clean water and set aside while you make the chowder base.
 3. Heat a large pot over medium heat. Add bacon (if not using, heat butter or olive oil in the pot and skip ahead to step 3) and cook, stirring occasionally, until the fat has rendered considerably, 10–12 minutes (the bacon shouldn't be crisped, just lightly browned).
 4. Increase heat to medium-high and add garlic and leeks to the pot. Season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until the leeks are bright green and softened, 6–8 minutes.
 5. Add celery, corn and potatoes and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are on their way to tender (but not yet falling apart), sweating a bit to evaporate some of the water and concentrate their flavors, 8–10 minutes.
 6. Add heavy cream, bay leaf (if using—and you should!) and 5 cups water (you can also use clam juice but I find water to be flavorful enough). Season with salt and lots of pepper and bring to a simmer. Reduce heat to medium and cook until potatoes are totally cooked through and tender, nearly falling apart, 20–25 minutes. Taste the broth—it should be flavorful and delicious already, even without the clams. The liquid should also be considerably thicker—both from the evaporation and the potatoes falling apart a little.

7. Add the clams and cover the pot. Bring back to a simmer and cook, without peeking, 5 or so minutes. The clams should start to steam open, give up their juices and further flavor the broth. You don't want to boil the clams after they've opened (they can get tough), but keeping them gently simmering is okay. Season with salt to taste and more pepper.
8. From here, you have a few choices. You can serve immediately. You can pluck the clams from the pot, remove them from the shell and either chop them or keep whole and return to the pot. You can let the chowder "cure" for a day or two (some swear by this) or eat it right away. Any of these is fine by me. I'm an instant gratification person and frankly like the presentation of whole shells and the larger pieces of clam.
9. To serve, finely chop parsley and or celery leaves and sprinkle over top. Serve alongside crackers or garlic bread, hot sauce and/or lemon.