

Perfecting Shrimp Scampi

Making a passable version of this restaurant standard is easy enough, but for truly first-rate results, we took stock of every detail.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

Shrimp scampi is rarely awful—it's unusual for things to go terribly wrong when garlic, wine, and butter are involved—but restaurant versions always make me wish I'd ordered differently. I have never been presented with the ultimate scampi, the one that I can almost taste when I peruse the menu: perfectly cooked, briny beauties in a garlicky, buttery (but not greasy) white wine sauce.

When I last made my way through a mediocre rendition, I decided it was time to realize this ideal scampi vision at home. Since shrimp are susceptible to overcooking, which can make them dry and tough, I gave my shrimp (1½ pounds, enough to serve four) a short dunk in a saltwater solution to season them and help preserve moisture. I then heated extra-virgin olive oil in a skillet, sautéed a few cloves of minced garlic and a dash of red pepper flakes, and added the shrimp. Once the shrimp turned opaque, I splashed in some dry white wine and followed it with a chunk of butter, a big squeeze of lemon juice, and a sprinkle of parsley.

My guests and I didn't go hungry that night, but the scampi was far from perfect. One problem was that the sauce separated into a butter-and-oil slick floating on top of the wine—not ideal in the looks department or for dunking bread into. (While some serve shrimp scampi over a pile of spaghetti, I think it's best with a crusty loaf.) Then there were the shrimp: Some were a little overdone, while others were still translucent. Finally, the overall dish was shy on both seafood and garlic flavors. For results that I'd be truly satisfied with, some adjustments were in order.

Shrimp Tales

Back in the test kitchen, I thought about ways to improve the shrimp. Flavorful crustaceans are often thought of as sweet, so would adding sugar to the brine be beneficial? Sure enough, my colleagues agreed that when used judiciously (2 tablespoons of



One detail perfected: Since lots of minced garlic can give the sauce a grainy quality, we use thinly sliced cloves instead.

sugar along with 3 tablespoons of salt in 1 quart of water), the sugar subtly boosted the natural flavor of the shrimp. I also found that using untreated shrimp, with no added salt or preservatives, produced the best results (see “The Right Shrimp”).

Another detail to consider was the cooking method. The inconsistent doneness of my first batch had come from crowding the skillet, so I needed to sauté the shrimp in batches. Or did I? What if, instead of sautéing the shrimp and then adding the wine, I gently poached the shrimp in the wine? As it turned out, this approach cooked all of the shrimp just right and in unison, as long as the skillet was covered with a lid to trap steam.

Now that I had flavorful, properly cooked shrimp, it was time to tackle the sauce. I had three items on my to-do list. First: Seriously bump up the flavor. (I'd found that the 5 minutes or so that it took to cook the shrimp wasn't long enough to impart much of a seafood taste to the dish.) Second: Add extra garlic for a more robust punch. Third: Fix the separated consistency.

Waste Not, Want Not

A few ladles of stock made from trimmings, bones, or other ingredient scraps can be a great way to infuse flavor into a sauce. Here I could make a stock from the shrimp shells, so I started buying shell-on shrimp instead of the prepeeled type (to save time, I started using the jumbo size so I'd have fewer to peel). To coax out every bit of savoriness, I first browned the shells in a little olive oil and then simmered them in the wine for 30 minutes with a few sprigs of thyme for a little more complexity. But the stock didn't taste all that shrimp. My incorrect assumption was that simmering the shells for a longer period of time would extract more flavor from them. A timing test conducted by a fellow test cook debunked that myth, finding that you get more flavor out of shrimp shells if you simmer them for only 5 minutes (see “When Less Time Means More Flavor”). This was an easy change I was happy to make.

Next, I doubled the amount of garlic. It worked to boost the garlic flavor but not without a cost: All of those minced pieces gave the sauce a gritty quality. To prevent this, I switched from mincing the cloves to slicing them into thin rounds. But since sliced garlic is milder in flavor than minced (garlic's bite is created in the act of damaging its cells; the finer it's cut, the stronger its flavor will be) the switch required that I double the number of cloves, to eight.

All that remained was to bind the fats and wine together into a cohesive sauce. In other words, I needed a stabilizer. I considered my choices: Flour, gelatin, and even pectin would work, but cornstarch seemed like the best option since it would require virtually no cooking to get the job done. I could hydrate the cornstarch in some of the wine, but I decided that it would be more convenient to use the lemon juice I was adding to the sauce for brightness. A mere teaspoon of cornstarch worked like a charm. I stirred the mixture into the sauce before adding the butter, which easily whisked into the rest of the sauce and stayed there, giving it a creamy, silky texture. In fact, it was so rich and creamy that I was able to scale back the amount of butter to 4 tablespoons without anyone finding it too lean. And there it was: the scampi I'd been looking for all along.



See How It's Done

Video available free for 4 months at [CooksIllustrated.com/feb16](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/feb16)

SCIENCE When Less Time Means More Flavor

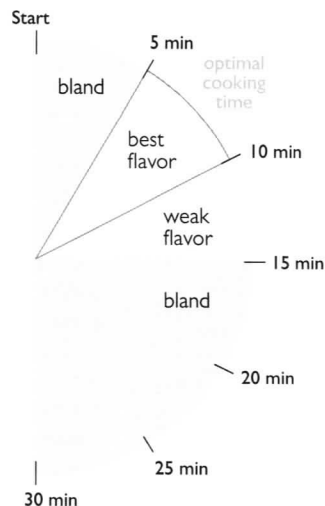
It's easy to view shrimp shells simply as an impediment to the sweet, briny flesh within, but the shells actually contain lots of flavorful compounds that can be extracted into a stock. We've always assumed that, as with beef bones, the longer shrimp stock simmered, the more intense its flavor would be. But was that really true? To find out, we designed a test to determine the optimal simmering time. —Dan Souza

EXPERIMENT

We simmered batches of shrimp shells in water, covered, for 5, 10, 15, and 30 minutes and then strained out the shells. We asked tasters to evaluate the flavor of each sample.

RESULTS

Tasters almost unanimously chose the 5- and 10-minute simmered samples as "more potent," "shrimpier," and "more aromatic" than the 15- and 30-minute simmered samples.



EXPLANATION

While some of the savory compounds found in shrimp shells are stable (i.e., they stay in the stock, rather than release into the atmosphere), the compounds that we associate with shrimp flavor are highly volatile. The longer a stock is simmered, the more of these molecules will release into the air, and the blander the stock will be.

TAKEAWAY

For the most flavorful shrimp stock, simmer shells for just 5 minutes.

SHRIMP SCAMPI

SERVES 4

Extra-large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound) can be substituted for jumbo shrimp. If you use them, reduce the cooking time in step 3 by 1 to 2 minutes. We prefer untreated shrimp, but if your shrimp are treated with sodium or preservatives like sodium tripolyphosphate (see "The Right Shrimp"), skip the brining in step 1 and add ¼ teaspoon of salt to the sauce in step 4. Serve with crusty bread. For our free recipe for Shrimp Scampi for Two, go to CooksIllustrated.com/feb16.

- 3 tablespoons salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1½ pounds shell-on jumbo shrimp (16 to 20 per pound), peeled, deveined, and tails removed, shells reserved
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice, plus lemon wedges for serving
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- 8 garlic cloves, sliced thin
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

1. Dissolve salt and sugar in 1 quart cold water in large container. Submerge shrimp in brine, cover, and refrigerate for 15 minutes. Remove shrimp from brine and pat dry with paper towels.

2. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch skillet over high heat until shimmering. Add shrimp shells

and cook, stirring frequently, until they begin to turn spotty brown and skillet starts to brown, 2 to 4 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and carefully add wine and thyme sprigs. When bubbling subsides, return skillet to medium heat and simmer gently, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Strain mixture through colander set over large bowl. Discard shells and reserve liquid (you should have about ⅔ cup). Wipe out skillet with paper towels.

3. Combine lemon juice and cornstarch in small bowl. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon oil, garlic, pepper flakes, and pepper in now-empty skillet over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until garlic is fragrant and just beginning to brown at edges, 3 to 5 minutes. Add reserved wine mixture, increase heat to high, and bring to simmer. Reduce heat to medium, add shrimp, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until shrimp are just opaque, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and, using slotted spoon, transfer shrimp to bowl.

4. Return skillet to medium heat, add lemon juice-cornstarch mixture, and cook until slightly thickened, 1 minute. Remove from heat and whisk in butter and parsley until combined. Return shrimp and any accumulated juices to skillet and toss to combine. Serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

The Right Shrimp

Many manufacturers add salt or sodium tripolyphosphate to shrimp to prevent darkening or water loss, but we found that these treatments made the shellfish watery and bland; the latter also produced a chemical taste. When buying frozen shrimp, look for a brand with "shrimp" as the only ingredient listed on the bag. Some supermarkets, such as Whole Foods, sell only untreated shrimp.

TESTING Mini Prep Bowl Sets

Many cooks use mini prep bowls to help them complete their *mise en place*, the preparation and arrangement of ingredients for tidier, better-organized cooking.

We gathered seven of the most widely available sets (priced from \$5.49 to \$22.06) to assess how easy they were to fill and empty and how well they contained different volumes of food. We also evaluated them for durability and ease of cleanup. With the exception of the silicone bowls, which were small, floppy, and retained food odors, most of the sets worked pretty well.

Glass mini prep bowls dominate the market, and for good reason. They're oven-, microwave-, and dishwasher-safe; they tend to be fairly sturdy; and they're easy to clean, retaining no off-odors or food stains. Our favorite set from Anchor Hocking includes six nested glass bowls of different sizes. Made of heavy glass, the relatively wide, shallow bowls were easy to fill, empty, and clean. Plus, a slight lip around the rim made them comfortable to grip. For complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/feb16. —Miye Bromberg

RECOMMENDED ANCHOR HOCKING 6-Piece Nesting Prep Bowl Set

MODEL: 92025L11

PRICE: \$11.00

COMMENTS: Our winning set performed ably on almost every test. Its microwaveable bowls were easy to fill, empty, and clean.



CORE TECHNIQUE

HOW TO PEEL AND DEVEIN SHRIMP



Many supermarkets carry easy-peel shrimp. The shells have been split open along the back for easy removal and the shrimp have already been deveined. If you can't find them, here is how to do the job yourself.

1. Peel shell away from flesh, starting at swimming legs, and then gently pull meat from tail.
2. Make ¼-inch-long incision along back of shrimp, then use tip of paring knife to remove vein.