

THE CHEF

Diane Forley

SOMETIMES when you start fooling around with a classic dish, all sorts of unexpected possibilities open up. This dish began when I wanted to make a different kind of risotto to serve with fish, one that wasn't weighed down with a lot of eggs, butter and cream. I wanted a lemony rice, with a little bit of body. Instead of merely flavoring it with lemon, I aimed for a saucelike base to hold the rice together.

In a moment of free association, I thought of avgolemono, the traditional Greek soup that's thickened with lemon and eggs. It turned out to be the perfect solution. The egg yolk binds the rice, and the lemon complements the fish. What's important is that you add egg and lemon off the heat — otherwise the egg will curdle. This is an excellent rice dish with all kinds of fish — salmon and halibut come immediately to mind — but it is perfect with skate, a sweet fish that matches up well with sharp, briny flavors like lemon or capers.

In a true risotto, the rice has to be cooked so that it retains a slight crunchiness, requiring vigilance on the part of the cook. My

This is the second of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbena. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

I wanted a lemony rice, with body.

version has a porridgelike consistency, so you can afford to overcook it by a few minutes. It can also be prepared ahead of time; remove it from the stove after two cups of the chicken stock has been absorbed, and resume the cooking later.

The texture of skate is unique. It shreds like crab meat and has the sweetness of crab meat, but it's definitely a fish in flavor. It's the first fish I ever caught, when I was 8, fishing on Long Island Sound. When it came out of the water, wings flapping and tail twitching, I thought it was some kind of monster. These days I buy it, of course, already filleted and skinless. Be sure to get a relatively thick wing so the fish holds together well in the pan.

To sear skate properly, be sure the pan is quite hot; the skate should slip back and forth on the oil when you give the pan a shake. If it does stick, don't touch it until it is seared. Then use a flexible slotted spatula to loosen the fish gently and flip it.



Daniel Pelavin

LEMON RISOTTO

Time: 40 minutes

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 1/4 cups coarsely chopped onion
- 2 cups arborio rice
- 6 cups chicken stock
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Finely grated zest of two lemons
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 3 eggs
- 2 tablespoons chilled unsalted butter, cut in small pieces (optional).

1. Heat olive oil in a 2 1/2- to 3-quart heavy-bottom saucepan over medium heat. Add chopped onion, and cook until translucent, about 8 minutes. With a wooden spoon, stir in the rice, taking care that the grains are coated.

2. Stir in 2 cups chicken stock. Increase heat slightly, bring to a boil and simmer until the rice has absorbed most of the stock (7 to 8 minutes), stirring occasionally to prevent

rice from sticking. Add salt and pepper and 2 more cups stock, and stir until liquid is once again nearly absorbed (7 to 8 minutes longer). Add the last 2 cups stock and lemon zest, and cook about 3 minutes. (Once rice has been added, the risotto should cook for about 20 minutes total. The third and final addition of stock should not be fully absorbed, and the mixture should be soupy rather than thick and creamy.) Remove from heat.

3. In a small bowl, whisk together the lemon juice, eggs and chilled butter pieces. Whisk a small amount (about 1/2 cup) of the hot rice mixture into the egg mixture. Pour the egg mixture into the rice, stirring constantly, and return the pan to low heat. Cook, stirring constantly to prevent curdling, until rice takes on a thick, creamy consistency, just a minute or so. Serve immediately with sautéed skate.

Yield: 4 servings.

SAUTÉED SKATE

Time: 10 minutes

- 2 skate wings, about 10 ounces each, skin and bone removed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- Lemon risotto (see recipe).

1. While the lemon risotto is cooking, wash skate wings, cut them in half and pat dry. Season on both sides with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

2. When the risotto is moments from being done, heat olive oil and butter over medium-high heat in a 12-inch skillet. When the butter foam subsides, add the skate, top side down (the top side has no membrane) and sauté about 3 minutes. Turn and sauté a minute or so longer.

3. To serve, place a serving of the lemon risotto in the middle of the plate and a portion of sautéed skate on top of it.

Yield: 4 servings.