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into a saucepan and heat until smoke rises, then pour over fish and flavourings. Drizzle on soy sauce, scatter with coriander and rush to the table.

**BRAISING AND STEWING**

With meat, braising means long slow cooking, but braising fish is rather different – a short spell in a heavy pan, the fish laid on a bed of vegetables and flavourings, with a little liquid, lid on. You can braise fish over a gentle heat on the top of the stove or at a moderate heat in the oven. Do not let it overcook.

When making stews or soups that include fish and shellfish, usually you should prepare the sauce/soup base in advance, the sea-food only needs to be added at the end of the process and stewed for the bare minimum.

**WHAT-YOU-WILL FISH STEW**

This stew can make the centrepiece of a casual lunch, served with warm, crusty bread and a green salad, or star in a more formal setting, served with noodles, rice or boiled new potatoes and a green vegetable. Last time we cooked this, we made the stew with cod, snapper and swordfish, but it is a good vehicle for almost any fish.

*Serves 6*

1kg/2lb 4oz mixed fish fillets, cut into pieces about 2.5cm/1in across and 4cm/1½in long

good pinch of saffron strands (optional)

1 white or red onion, chopped

2 celery sticks, thinly sliced

4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

4 garlic cloves, chopped

1 tablespoon coriander seeds, roughly crushed

1 teaspoon cumin seeds or ½ teaspoon ground cumin

2 bayleaves

1 sizeable fresh thyme sprig

2 x 400g/14oz tins of chopped tomatoes

2 heaped tablespoons tomato purée

1 glass (110ml/4fl oz) red wine (optional)

300ml/½ pint fish stock or water

1-2 tablespoons sugar (optional)

Season the fish and set aside. Put saffron into a small bowl, if using, and add a tablespoon of hot water. Leave to infuse. Fry onion and celery in olive oil over a moderate heat, letting them colour here and there. When they are almost done, add garlic, coriander, cumin, bayleaves and thyme. Cook for two minutes. Stir in tomatoes and tomato purée, leave to boil down until very thick – about 10 minutes – stirring occasionally. Now add wine, if using, bring to the boil and cook for a minute or so, then add the stock or water. Season. Simmer for five minutes and taste. If it is rather sharp tasting, which it probably will be, add sugar, to soften. Simmer for another five to 10 minutes. The stew can be prepared to this stage in advance. If you do this, re-heat it thoroughly, about 10 minutes before you wish to serve it. Add the fish, together with the saffron, give it a quick stir, then let it simmer gently for about five minutes. Draw off the heat, taste and adjust seasonings, then serve.

# Thought for Foc