

Poaching is the most interesting of the moist heat cooking methods to me. Boiling has its place – it's critical to some dishes. Braising and simmering are great ways to cook and make flavorful and tender dishes. But I am going to let them be the basis of another column.

For now let's take a close look at poaching.

To poach is to cook submerged in a liquid that is usually between 140 and 180 degrees. It's a great way to cook delicate foods and something that dries out quickly.

The most important things to remember are that the liquid imparts flavor and that the temperature is critical to good results.

The cooking liquid is most always salted. An exception is that poached eggs are cooked in water with vinegar added. The egg would absorb too much salt and the vinegar helps the eggs firm up quicker.

The seasoned cooking liquid is often referred to as court bouillon. This is water, stock and/or wine that is flavored with aromatics like onion, carrots, garlic, bay leaves, lemon and so on. Since the item you are cooking is going to absorb some of the liquid, the court bouillon needs to be rich in flavor and one that will compliment the item you are cooking.

Don't confuse this court bouillon with the New Orleans dish of the same spelling. It is a dish of its own. They call it "ku-bee-yawn." We'll talk about that one another time.

As to temperature you see various ranges. The one you find most is 170 to 180 degrees. At this point the surface of the liquid will be barely quivering. Any hotter and you enter the "simmer zone." This is where flavor starts going out of your food and more delicate items won't survive intact.

A temperature this high is fine in that it cook pretty quickly. The downside is that you can overcook easily. Food doesn't take kindly to overcooking.

Fixing that is not difficult but it takes patience. You must pay careful and frequent attention to your thermometer.

For me I first determine what temperature I want the finished product to be. Then that's the temperature I set my poaching liquid. Once I have made my court bouillon and cooled it, I never let it get above that finished temp.

Here's why. It seems simple to me. Say you want your fish to be 145 degrees to suit your perception of "done" for that particular fish. Lots of folks are accustomed to overcooked fish.

If you put your fish in a 350-degree oven, you have to take it out along the way and let it finish cooking as it rests. If you cook it in a sauté pan, the same is true. So when to take it out becomes critical. And every piece of fish is slightly different.

That deep fryer is 350 to 375. So it's just as hard to judge doneness there.

But if you have the temperature of your poaching liquid at 145 degrees, your fish will never get any hotter. It can't. So it won't overcook. You can check the temperature of the fish along the way. When it gets to 145, it's done. If you let it stay a while, it won't get any more done because there is no extra heat to make that happen.

Now the downside to letting your fish sit in the warm liquid longer is that it could get too soft from absorbing extra moisture. Even worse is that it picks up too much flavor from the court bouillon.

If you want flavorful and tender chicken breasts, try poaching. Set the temperature to 160 and you will be very happy. For dark meat, aim at 165 to 170 degrees.

Poached shrimp is much better than the boiled kind. It's tenderer and has better flavor. 145 degrees is perfect unless you like firmer more opaque shrimp. If so, go for 155 to 160.

If you must restrict your salt and/or fat intake, poaching is the perfect solution. Just don't add any fat or salt to your poaching liquid. Trim your meat closely or remove the skin. If you keep the temp of the liquid no higher than the final one you want, your food will be both tasty and moist.

It is important to remember to always submerge your food in the poaching liquid. You want all of it beneath the surface of the liquid.

It is just as important that the food never touch the bottom of the pan that is in contact with the heat. The best way to accomplish this is with a rack. Long fish poachers come with a rack that keeps the food off the bottom and gives you a convenient way to pick it up out of the liquid.

Except for a few uses, the poaching liquid should be up to temperature before adding the food to be cooked. Adjust the heat source after adding something cold to get it back close to temperature quickly. Just be careful to not let it go above your final desired temp.

Check out some recipes for poaching. Make the cooking liquid using the suggested seasonings. Prepare the food for poaching as explained. Then consider using the "done" temperature for your liquid rather than the higher one in the recipe.

Remember that you are going to be poaching your food longer than the recipe requires because you are cooking at a lower temperature. Consequently it will absorb more flavors from the poaching liquid.

Simply said poaching is not a dull flavorless method of cooking that produces bland food. You can do many different things by poaching that will give you lots of pleasure and diversity. And it's a very healthy way to prepare food.

So this spring and summer try poaching as an alternative cooking method. You won't heat up the kitchen as much. And you can have some easy and light food to boot.