



Baked Clam Chowder

on the Half-Shell

Serves 6 as an Appetizer

This is a fun twist on New England clam chowder. Here I use a basic recipe for baked stuff clams and add in classic chowder ingredients. Don't let the length of this recipe daunt you! You'll be amazed at how easy this is to prepare, which makes these little "shooters" a welcome addition to a casual buffet-style dinner, or even when plated for more formal service. No one can resist picking up the shells and slurping down the delicious creamy chowder filling.

Ingredients:

25-50 littleneck or cherrystone clams (about 2 – 3-inches in size), depending on preference for clam taste
1 medium shallot minced (about 1 1/2 to 2 tablespoons)
2/3 cup dry (crisp) white wine (such as unoaked Chardonnay, Chablis, or Riesling)
4 thick slices smoked bacon
5 tablespoons butter, divided
1 small Vidalia (or other sweet variety) onion, chopped fine (about 1/2 cup)
2 cloves garlic, minced (about 2 teaspoons)
2 medium potatoes, steamed until just soft, about 10 minutes, then peeled and chopped to a 1/4-inch dice
1/2 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup whole milk
Scant 1/3 cup unbleached flour
Sea salt and fresh ground pepper, to season
Sweet Hungarian paprika, to garnish

Preparation:

Preheat the oven to 375° F.

Scrub and thoroughly rinse the clams, then place into a large pot. Add the shallots and wine and place over high heat. Cover and steam the clams until they open about 3 to 5 minutes.

Transfer the clams to a large bowl discarding any that are cracked and unopened. Reserve the steaming liquid. When cool enough to handle, remove the clam meat holding the clams over a bowl to catch any juices. Reserve the shells. Chop the clams and pour any collected clam juice back into the reserved steaming liquid. Break the shells in half at the hinge and arrange 36 halves on a cookie sheet. Set aside. Strain the steaming liquid through a sieve lined with a double-layer of cheese cloth. Measure 1/2 cup of the liquid into a medium saucepan (discard the remaining liquid) and set aside. Add the cream and the milk to the liquid and place saucepan over medium-high heat. Heat until bubbles form around the edge of the liquid. Remove from heat. Set aside.

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Place a medium skillet over medium heat, add the bacon and cook until crisp. Remove bacon to a paper-towel lined plate. When cool, crumble with fingertips. Set aside. Meanwhile, add 1 tablespoon of butter to the skillet, then the onion, garlic and potatoes. Toss to coat in the flavorful fat and sauté until onion is translucent, garlic golden brown and potatoes are beginning to crisp on the edges, about 5 to 7 minutes. Remove from heat. Set aside.

In another saucepan, melt the remaining butter over medium heat. Add the flour and whisk vigorously. Continue cooking for another 2 minutes while whisking constantly. The mixture will bubble and turn golden. Continue whisking and slowly add the cream mixture. Continue whisking over the heat; the mixture will thicken quickly, about 3 minutes more. Once the mixture is thick, remove the saucepan from the heat. Add the clams and then the onion mixture. Stir to combine. The mixture should be quite thick (resembling a condensed soup out of a can). Season to taste.

Spoon the cream and clam mixture into the prepared half-shells. Sprinkle the crumbled bacon and the paprika over the filled clam shells. Place in the preheated oven and bake for about 5 minutes, or until bubbling. Change heat setting of the oven to broil. Clams will begin to lightly brown in about 1-2. The cream filling can burn quickly, so check the clams often.

Remove from oven; carefully transfer to a serving plate. Serve immediately.

Chef's Note: These can be made 6 hours in advance: Prepare the clam filling and fill the clam shells. Cover with cling film and refrigerate. Remove from refrigerator and allow to come to room temperature while oven preheats. Add bacon and paprika garnish, and then bake as directed.

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