

Is Conch Chowder An Aphrodisiac?

Many Bahamians certainly think so. (With recipes.)

“Conch chowder is like a vitamin,” Harcourt Cambridge told me over the phone from the Bahamas. “It makes you strong as a lion.”

Every cook I know seems to have soup on the brain this season, and every self-basting food magazine has been trumpeting the virtues of the bowl. With winter here, I was

curious—and hungry. A great recipe for conch chowder—the unofficial national dish of the Bahamas, steamy with the fragrance of tropical seas and spices—seemed so uncannily just what I needed to keep my disposition sunny that I grabbed my notebook and hopped on a flight to Nassau.

The term “conch” (pronounced “konk”) can refer to a range of marine mollusks. The one Bahamians savor lives inside a whorled, cone-shaped shell with a flaring outer lip.



Its meat rivals the sweetest of clams. Testaments to the toothsome-ness of whelks and conchs like *Strombus gigas* can be seen all over Florida, where the original inhabitants piled up mounds of shells after devouring their meat. As mentioned elsewhere in this issue ("A

Certain Kind of Paradise," page 50), folks from Key West—where conch was once plentiful but is now so fished out that taking it is illegal—still refer to themselves as "conchs." British loyalists who fled the United States at the time of the Revolution to resettle in the Bahamas were called that, too.

In the Bahamas, conch was once so abundant that it was used for fish bait. Now it is scarcer, but a good wild supply remains, and the delectable creature is still a common food. Typical dishes include conch salad, with raw chopped conch marinated with onions, peppers, tomatoes and lime juice; conch fritters, with chopped conch mixed into a cornmeal batter and deep fried; and, of course, conch chowder.

The ideal preparation for conch meat, which can be rubbery, is to chop it fine and simmer it to tenderize the meat and release its flavor.

Cracking, cleaning and skinning conch is a mighty messy job, though the fellows who do it at harbor-front stands in the islands make it look off-hand and graceful. Fortunately for North American cooks, the frozen conch available in this country, much

ing everybody I met for conch chowder recipes. A vendor in the outdoor market on Potters Cay gave hers freely. It sounded like just the old standby I had hoped to find—except for the addition of Accent. Maybe the fact that all she was selling was crab should have tipped me off.

The taxi driver who took me to the plane for the short flight to Eleuthera said he ate conch chowder all the time. How did he fix his? "I open a can," he roared.

On Eleuthera, a taxi driver who had once cooked on the mail boats that serve as life-lines for the scattered Bahamas island communities told how he makes chowder. But he was one of those instinctive chefs for whom a recipe is more a sort of folk memory than a set of clear instructions. I took notes as he spoke, but now all I can glean from them is that he caramelizes chopped onions

Richard Haja's Compass Point Conch Chowder

- ¼ cup canola oil
- 4 conchs, finely chopped
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 stalk fresh thyme
- 1 teaspoon crushed black pepper
- ¼ Scotch bonnet pepper, finely chopped (If you can't find this fiery Caribbean pepper, use any hot chili.)
- 1 large onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 large carrot, coarsely chopped
- 1 large potato, coarsely chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, coarsely chopped
- 1 rib celery, coarsely chopped
- 8 cups fish stock or water
- 1 ounce dark rum
- 5 tablespoons butter
- 5 tablespoons flour

Heat the oil, add the conch, thyme, black pepper, Scotch bonnet and bay leaves and cook for five to seven minutes, stirring constantly. Add the onion, carrot, potato, celery and bell pepper and cook for five minutes longer. Add the rum and the stock or water. Bring to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, make a roux by melting the butter over medium heat and whisking in the flour; cook, whisking, until the roux is blond to brown in color and remove it from the heat to cool down. Whisk the roux into the chowder and cook for half an hour more over very low heat. Salt to taste. Serves four. "It's better the second day," Haja says, "and still better the third." —J.L.

Monica Thompson's Gregory Town Conch Chowder

- 4 strips of bacon, diced
- 2 or more large onions, diced
- 4 large ripe tomatoes (or 12 ounces of canned crushed tomatoes)
- 1 small can tomato paste
- 2 teaspoons flour
- 5 conchs, ground fine in a food processor
- 4 ribs celery, diced
- 2 green bell peppers, diced
- 2-3 carrots, diced
- 2-3 potatoes, diced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, or ¼ teaspoon dried crushed thyme

Fry the bacon, and when it releases its fat, add the onions to sauté until they're transparent. Meanwhile, skin and crush the tomatoes. Add them to the onions and bacon, along with the tomato paste, and simmer five minutes. Blend in the flour, then add all the remaining ingredients, plus two cups of water, and salt and pepper. Simmer for one hour. Serves four. "The more onions you use," says Thompson, "the better." —J.L.



of it from the Bahamas, is ready to use. It can be found at some specialty grocers and fish markets and at shops in West Indian neighborhoods. At fish markets along the Atlantic coast, fresh conch is sometimes available, but beware: It's likely to be not *Strombus gigas* but one of its fishier-tasting northern cousins.

Once I got to Nassau, I started ask-

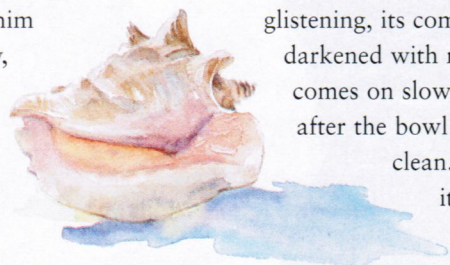
to start and uses meat tenderizer on the conch.

He dropped me in the dusty settlement of Gregory Town, where I found Harcourt Cambridge's restaurant, Cambridge Villas (800-688-4752 or 809-335-5080), and ordered a bowl of chowder. A basket of fluffy homemade bread appeared, with foil-wrapped pats of butter gone soft in

the tropical heat, and then the soup. It was thick and filling, mildly spicy, and subtly flavored with tomato. But when I applied for the recipe, I was rebuffed. A lot of people think Cambridge's leonine creation is tops, so he treats the recipe like a corporate secret and wouldn't turn it loose.

Walking off this lunch, I lumbered up a steep grade—one of the few on low-slung Eleuthera—to where I found Monica Thompson's little bakery, smack atop the hill (809-335-5053). Sometimes, as the whim moves her, she also serves meals from the kitchen of her jungle-green concrete house; guests take seats at outdoor tables with a million-dollar view over village and sea. Whim not moving her that day, she willingly gave me instead her recipe for conch chowder. It was easy to follow and free of modern additives. I have since prepared it for a gathering of appreciative friends and found that it makes a hearty, rustic stew you can practically stand your spoon in. It's not at all spicy; Thompson serves it with bottled pepper sauce on the side.

So I had my fitfully growing collection of recipes, but I still hadn't tasted the really knockout chowder. I still hadn't been "conked." Once back in Nassau, I headed for Compass Point, a restaurant that has been a sensation since it opened two years ago (800-688-7678 or 809-327-4500). It's attached to a stylish little resort of the same name, a compound perched on a rocky bit of beach with a dozen and a half wooden "huts" in dizzying tropical hues. In the restaurant, spiraled cross-sections of conch shells are laid into the crazy tiling on the bar's countertop, and the terrace's sea wall is studded with whole ones. The shells'



The conch Bahamians savor lives inside a whorled, cone-shaped shell with a flaring outer lip. Its meat rivals the sweetest of clams.

lustrous interiors glow hot pink with the same intensity as the colors of the chairs, tables and umbrellas—orchid, lemon, mango, passion fruit—and of the aqua ocean below.

Here Toronto-born chef Richard Haja uses Bahamian ingredients in ways some locals had to be cajoled into sampling, strongly influenced by the cuisines of Asia. "The lightness works in this hot climate, and a lot of the local ingredients are similar," he says. Haja puts mango in his conch salad and corn kernels in his conch fritters—both departures from island tradition. He makes conch sushi, too. His chowder, which I sat down to try as soon as I arrived, is smooth and glistening, its complex flavor darkened with rum. Its heat comes on slowly and lingers after the bowl is scraped clean. Haja serves it up alongside hunks of a caky, slightly sweet bread. He took out a pen, made some calculations and handed over his recipe.

Before I left the islands, I visited Montagu Beach, at the east end of Nassau, where tourists don't generally go. There it finally dawned on me what Cambridge meant about conch's salutary effect on a person's vitality. At Montagu, several vendors sell produce and conch fresh off the boats, beneath a hand-lettered billboard. Bahamians, it turns out, believe the succulent snail to be an aphrodisiac. "First the conch," it read, "and then the love. . . ."

Atlanta novelist and freelance writer Jonathan Lerner didn't tell his dinner guests that Strombus gigas means "giant snail" in Latin.

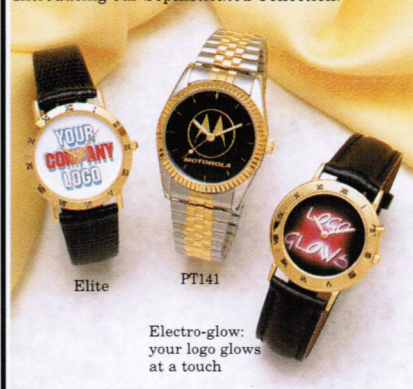
FOR PRODUCT DETAIL: CALL FOR BROCHURE 1-800-872-0392 or VISIT OUR HOME PAGE: HTTP://WWW.PERFECTTIME.COM

FOR PRODUCT DETAIL: CALL FOR BROCHURE 1-800-872-0392 or VISIT OUR HOME PAGE: HTTP://WWW.PERFECTTIME.COM

PERFECT PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS

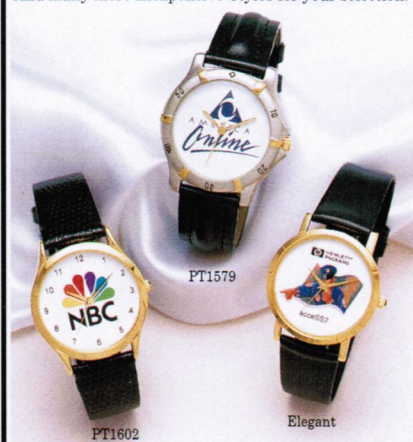
Enhance your business image with these high quality logo watches. 20 years experience in watch making enable us to provide excellent quality and craftsmanship. Give customized watches as incentives & promotional gifts.

Introducing our Sophisticated Collection:



Electro-glow: your logo glows at a touch

And many more Inexpensive Styles for your selection:



new Laser engraved deluxe wooden pen & matching case



SPECIAL INTRO. OFFER: LIMIT 8 PCS PER ITEM

ITEM	QTY ORDER	@SAMPLE PRICE	TOTAL
Elite	Men's <input type="checkbox"/> Ladies' <input type="checkbox"/>	\$14.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
PT141	Men's <input type="checkbox"/> Ladies' <input type="checkbox"/>	\$19.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
Electro-Glow:	23K gold plated <input type="checkbox"/>	\$22.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Titanium plated <input type="checkbox"/>	\$22.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
PT1602	Men's <input type="checkbox"/> Ladies' <input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
PT1579	Men's <input type="checkbox"/> Ladies' <input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
Elegant	Men's <input type="checkbox"/> Ladies' <input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.50	<input type="checkbox"/>
	PT119: Rosewood <input type="checkbox"/> Maple <input type="checkbox"/>	\$21.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Subtotal			<input type="checkbox"/>
8.25% Sales Tax (CA Only)			<input type="checkbox"/>
Shipping & Handling: \$2.50 for first 4 units, 0.50 for each additional unit			<input type="checkbox"/>
Grand Total			<input type="checkbox"/>

please attach logo from business card or letterhead

To Order: simply attach logo with order & payment

*MAIL TO:

PERFECT TIME INC.

1422-28 S. Broadway, Dept. SD, Los Angeles, CA 90015
Tel: 213-746-3231 Fax: 213-746-1169

FOR PRODUCT DETAIL: CALL FOR BROCHURE 1-800-872-0392 or VISIT OUR HOME PAGE: HTTP://WWW.PERFECTTIME.COM

FAST TURNAROUND LOW REORDERING PRICE** Free modification if not satisfied / Money back guarantee