

Black Sea Bass with Dirty Martini Butter Sauce – Comfort du Jour

On a recent visit to my favorite local seafood shop, I spotted black sea bass, a fish I had never tried before. The clerk described it as “mild and flaky, like snapper but a touch sweeter. I had planned to make a piccata sauce for it, but I got distracted with the idea of swapping out the white wine, lemon and capers in favor of a dirty martini. It turned out terrific!

Technically, the alcohol infusion I’ve used here is what a bartender would call a “reverse martini,” because the ratio of gin to vermouth has been flipped. And my splash of olive juice was far more generous than I’d ever drink in a cocktail (I used a full ounce of it), so a bartender would probably declare the drink infusion to be a “filthy reverse martini.” Filthy indeed.

INGREDIENTS

2 fillets fresh black sea bass (or other mild, flaky whitefish)
1 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 Tbsp. canola (or other neutral) oil
1 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil (a rich, fruity one is great)
1/2 medium onion, diced (about 1/2 cup)
1 reverse filthy martini* (see note below)
1 heaping tsp. pimentos from a jar
3 Tbsp. completely cold butter (for swirling in at the end)
Small handful of fresh parsley, chopped (for serving)
Lemon wedges (for serving)

*NOTE

Martini ingredients are 1.5 oz. dry or extra-dry vermouth, .5 oz. gin, 1 oz. olive juice, 3 olives. Do not shake or stir the martini with ice, as you would for drinking. Just combine the ingredients in a glass or measuring cup at room temperature. Chop or slice the olives and set them aside.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Score the skin side of the fish fillets in a few places. Any sharp knife will do, and you want to make your slashes only slightly deeper than the skin itself. Dust the same side of the fillets with the flour, gently rubbing it into the skin with your hands. Shake off and discard the excess flour.
2. Place a large stainless skillet over medium heat. When the pan is hot, swirl in the oils.
3. Gently lay the fillets into the oil, skin side-down, and *leave them alone*. Disturbing it at this point will shred the fish, and it is not necessary because the skin will release from the pan on its own when it gets crispy. Let the fish cook most of the way through until the flesh appears opaque nearly to the top. This will only take 4 or 5 minutes, depending on your pan and the temperature of the fish when you started.
4. Gently turn the fillets and cook the second side, but only about a minute. Transfer the fish to a warm plate and cover very loosely with a sheet of foil, so you retain the crispy skin.

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5. Add the onions to the pan and season them with salt and pepper. Sauté for a few minutes, until they are soft and translucent. Add the olives and pimentos and toss until hot.
6. Pour the entire reverse martini into the pan and stir to loosen any burned bits from the bottom of the pan. They deserve to be part of your dish. Turn down the heat a bit and let this mixture simmer to reduce the liquid and burn off some of the alcohol flavor.
7. While the pan simmers, take the cold butter out of the fridge and cut it into pieces no larger than a tablespoon each. I really appreciate the lines on the butter package for this purpose.
8. When the liquid portion of the pan mixture is reduced to 3 tablespoons, turn off the heat. Use a fork to pierce one piece of butter, swirling it around in the pan until it looks creamy and emulsified. Be sure to drag the butter through the pan ingredients, and not just the center. When the first pat of butter is melted, repeat with the remaining pats.
9. Divide the butter sauce between your serving plates, and then place the crispy fish fillets on top of the sauce, drizzling any lingering sauce over just part of the fish to dress it up. Sprinkle with fresh chopped parsley, squeeze lemon over and serve immediately.