

crystallizing, we poured the water into the skillet first and then gently sprinkled the sugar evenly over the water. By evenly distributing the sugar we were able to eliminate the need to stir the mixture before it caramelized, which helped keep sugar from crystallizing on the sides of the skillet.

With our caramel in place, we turned to the other ingredients in the sauce. Garlic is a common addition and tasters liked a hefty five cloves. Vegetable oil and pork fatback are the two types of fat typically used in this dish; we chose vegetable oil because every cook is likely to have it on hand and a neutral flavor doesn't compete with the caramel. We mixed the garlic with the vegetable oil, then poured the mixture into the caramel to cook and release its flavors.

The remaining question was how much fish to add. Knowing that a little goes a long way, wanting to keep the careful balance of salty and sweet that is the hallmark of this dish, we tried amounts ranging from 2 tablespoons to ½ cup. After the first round of tasting, we settled on ¼ cup fish as the perfect balance to the ½ cup of sugar and caramel. Our sauce was just about finished, so we decided to add a good dose of black pepper to give the spicy dimension to the sauce that had eluded us in initial recipe tests.

Finally, we focused our attention on the catfish. In the recipes we came across called for catfish with the skin on, but these aren't available at supermarkets, so we settled upon using the readily available skinless catfish fillets. We found a huge span of cooking times in the recipes we researched, so we decided to test the range. We cooked the fish for five minutes, ten minutes, and two hours. Contrary to years of advice, the longer you cook fish in the test kitchen, the better. Cooked for two hours, while a bit mealy, was still acceptable. The fish cooked for five minutes didn't have enough time in the pan to acquire the flavor of the sauce, but we found that a cooking time of 30 minutes was just long enough for the sauce to thicken and for the fish to absorb the complex flavors.

With just a sprinkling of cilantro leaves and scallions, this dish has quickly become a new favorite in the kitchen.

Catfish in Salty-Sweet Caramel Sauce

Ca Kho To

SERVES 4 TO 6

We particularly like the flavor of catfish here; however, any thin, medium-firm white fish fillets can be substituted. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to boil, then measure out the desired amount. Serve with Simple Steamed White Rice (page 516).

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 5 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 5 teaspoons)
- ¼ cup cold water
- ⅓ cup sugar
- 2 cups boiling water (see note)
- ¼ cup fish sauce
- 1½ teaspoons ground black pepper
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless catfish fillets (about 5 medium fillets), sliced crosswise into 2-inch-wide pieces
- 1 cup loosely packed fresh cilantro leaves
- 3 scallions, green parts only, sliced thin on the bias (see page 505)

1. Mix the oil and garlic together in a small bowl and set aside. Pour the ¼ cup cold water into a 12-inch nonstick skillet, then sprinkle the sugar evenly into the water. Cook the water-sugar mixture over medium heat, gently swirling the pan occasionally (do not stir), until the sugar melts and the mixture turns the color of maple syrup, about 10 minutes.

2. Stir in the garlic mixture and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Off the heat, slowly whisk in the 2 cups boiling water (the sauce may bubble and sizzle slightly). Return the skillet to medium heat and stir in the fish sauce and pepper.

3. Lay the catfish fillets in the skillet (without overlapping), and turn to coat evenly with the sauce. Bring to a simmer, then reduce the heat to medium-low and cook, uncovered, until the fish is tender and the sauce has thickened to a thick, syrupy consistency, about 25 minutes.

4. Transfer the fish to a platter and pour the sauce over the top. Sprinkle with the cilantro and scallions and serve.

