

Scallops with orange-tarragon beurre blanc

Serves: 6-8 as starter, 4 as main

Total time: 30-45 mins

Ingredients:

24 medium-large fresh scallops

2-3 tbsps olive oil

zest and juice (approx 3 tbsps) of one orange

3 tbsps Grand Marnier, Cointreau or Triple Sec

3 tbsps white wine vinegar

3 tbsps chopped fresh tarragon

2 tbsps minced shallot

6 peppercorns

450g (1lb) unsalted, good quality butter

6 baby courgettes (a mix of green and yellow ones is nice)

3 medium-sized carrots

salt and pepper



Method:

1. Cut butter into 1" cubes. Bring to room temperature so soft to the touch.
2. Remove the crescent-shaped roe ('coral') and white muscular 'skirts' from the scallops if present. Rinse, dry and season all over with salt and pepper.
3. Julienne the courgettes and carrots. You want dainty matchstick-sized pieces. Discard the seedy core of the courgettes. There's no need to peel the carrots – instead you can square them off to make the julienning easier.
4. In a small pan combine orange juice, zest, liqueur, vinegar, shallot, most of the tarragon and peppercorns. (Save the rest of the herbs for garnishing.) Simmer to reduce until approx 3 tbsps of liquid remains. Be careful not to go too far. Strain it through a sieve and then return to the pan.
5. No more than 15 mins before you want to eat, start cooking the carrots and courgettes: First heat 2 of your cubes of butter and 1-2 tbsps olive oil in a frying pan. Add the carrots, toss and season with salt and pepper. Cook over a medium heat stirring occasionally for 2-3 mins. Add a little water – just enough to barely cover them – and continue cooking another 2-3 mins. At this point the carrots should be nearly done and most of the water should have evaporated. Add the courgettes, season again, toss round and cook a further 2-3 mins. It's nice if the vegetables are still slightly 'al dente'.

6. Meanwhile, make the beurre blanc sauce: Make sure your orange-tarragon reduction is still very warm. If not, heat it up. Off the heat, whisk in one of your cubes of butter, then another. The idea is to start an emulsion. Set pan on low heat and whisk in rest of the butter, adding a few cubes at a time. You want to get it hot, but not so hot it separates. Don't let it boil, and whisk vigorously! You should end up with a thick, smooth, creamy sauce. If it separates you may need to start again. It's a temporary emulsion, which is why it's safest to make it shortly before serving. Taste as you go. You may well not need all the butter. The idea is to get a nice balance between the acidity of the reduction and the rich butter (as you would with Hollandaise). You will definitely need to add at least a couple of good pinches of salt to bring out the flavours. Keep sauce warm till serving.
7. When sauce and vegetables are both ready, quickly cook the scallops: Brush a frying pan (preferably non-stick) with a little olive oil and get it really hot. Sear the scallops for just 2 mins on each side, maximum. Remove them the instant you can see that they are opaque throughout.
8. Serve immediately! I would serve this plated. Make a pyramid of scallops next to a pile of vegetables, spoon some sauce over the scallops and garnish with a little chopped tarragon. Delicious.

This recipe is an adaptation of one from the Girl and the Fig cookbook. The Girl and the Fig is a really sweet restaurant in Sonoma where we have eaten a couple of times after spending the day wine tasting in Sonoma Valley. However, I'd drink a white Burgundy (chardonnay) with this dish.

Beurre blanc can seem a little tricky to make the first time, but it's worth learning as it goes really well with a range of fish, vegetable and egg dishes. You can experiment with different flavours in the reduction by using different herbs and fruit juices. The reduction should also contain vinegar and/or wine.

Scallop facts:

- Scallops swim by rapidly opening and closing their shells.
- They are hermaphroditic. The colour of their roe is determined by the gender of the parent (at the time). Red = female. White = male.
- Scallops have eyes! In fact, over 60 of them. They're blue. See pic. We don't eat them though. We just eat the muscle that holds the shells together, which is sometimes, confusingly, called 'the eye'.
- Try to buy 'dry packed' scallops as they are additive-free. 'Wet-packed' ones contain a chemical to make them absorb water before being frozen.
- The scallop shell is the emblem of St James, hence the dish *coquilles St Jacques*. In Dutch scallops are *Jakobsschelp*. Rumour has it that St James fell into a river and came out covered in scallops, which seems unlikely.

