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How Salt Cod conquered the World

By Richard Robinson

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"...as ill luck would have it, it happened to be Friday and there was nothing to be had at the inn but some pieces of fish, which is called Abadexo in Castile, Bacallao in Andalucía, Curadillo in some places..." Cervantes: Don Quixote, 1605.

We here in Britain/US might think of it as salt cod, or stockfish, were we to think about it at all – which is unlikely. But as in so many other ways, Spain differs from us too on the question of salt cod. Bacalao (to give its most widely-used title) is elevated to legendary, near mythical status, a dish of iconic significance in festival and fiesta, a staple of such immense substance it once saved a city from siege. For the feeding of the multitude, the Forty Fishes aren't even in it. With their holds stuffed with bacalao, Biscayan whalers crossed the North Atlantic to Newfoundland, and the Spanish conquistadors reached the New World. In the Spanish language, cortar el bacalao, to 'cut the cod', is to be the boss.

Concerning cod, written records are sketchy, but we can draw on at least a few sure facts. Certainly the first Carlist War of the 1830s is a matter of historic record, as is the siege of Bilbao. A footnote to the conflict describes how a shopkeeper of that city, before the outbreak of hostilities, ordered "some 20 or 22" bacalao from a trader. Of course, in Spanish this would have read "20 o 22", an order which some sloppy clerk mis-recorded as 20,022. The boatload of bacalao arrived shortly before the Carlists laid siege to the city. The shopkeeper, at first bemused but soon delighted, became rich on the error, while Bilbao's citizens saw out the siege on frugal rations of nutritious salt cod. To this day, spicy, garlicky bacalao al pil-pil and bacalao a la vizcaina, in a rich sauce of tomato and olives, are signature dishes of Basque cuisine, and no Bilbao bar would be without at least one type of bacalao-based, bite-size pintxo to offer the gourmet tippler.

The celebrity of bacalao in Spain seems an unlikely phenomenon on the face of it. The flensed, dried and crucified fillet looks anything but appetising. Old-vest off-white in colour and coated with a rough salty dandruff, its texture is of balsa wood and its aroma faintly urinal. Get your preparation wrong and your bacalao's an assault on the senses. My first experience of bacalao was memorable, less for the

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eating than for the protracted spitting-out – of scales and bones – and the gulping of beer to purge the briny aftertaste. Don Qixote, too, was unlucky, for: "...the landlord brought him a piece of that salt fish, but ill-watered and as ill-dressed..." .

A single experience should not colour one's outlook and in the company of Rafael Andrés, president of the Madrid Restaurant and Café Association, I once enjoyed bacalao so fragrant, so succulent and delicious – its perfectly-cooked flesh yielding to the fork in moist flakes, the sauce rich and subtly spiced, complementing the cod to perfection – as to raise senses to gastronomic nirvana. And the secret, the alchemy, the magic by which malodorous slab is transmuted to mouth-watering delicacy is.... love.

Yes, cariño, it seems, is all you need. That and plenty of time. First the ragged and scaly bits of the dry bacalao are trimmed, then the flesh with skin attached is placed in plenty of fresh water and left to soak for no less than 24 hours. Three times the water should be replaced so as to purge the unwanted

sodium bicarbonate, and to rehydrate the cod to its former pale plumpness, to prepare it for the pan. The cod pieces are first boiled in an earthenware pot until a white froth appears, then removed to a casserole dish and sizzled in virgin olive oil, to one of a score of different recipes. From the storekeeper's slab to the plate, the bacalao must be treated with tenderness and care. It must be watched-over, encouraged, coaxed and tricked into its edible guise and in this, Spanish chefs are expert.

Portuguese too, for in the matter of bacalao (or bacalhão, over the border) the Portuguese are if anything even more obsessive. They each consume some ten kilos per annum, and the Portuguese housewife is said to have 365 different ways of preparing the stuff. A simple search of the Internet throws-up no fewer than 3,500 sites dedicated to bacalhão. The Brazilians and other Latin Americans are similarly partial, as are the French, Greeks, Italians, North Africans and Norse. Bacalao has conquered the Iberian Peninsula and a large chunk of the world besides, but its story begins in the Basque lands of the Bay of Biscay.

From their scuffles with the Vikings, the Basques discovered that the belligerent, bull-horned invaders travelled on a diet of crude dried fish. The resourceful Basques took hold of this idea and improved on it, by salting as well as drying, a practice they already employed with whale meat. They also improved the design of their own boats, borrowing ideas from the Vikings. This was in the ninth century and, by the tenth, the long lasting qualities of salt fish meant that the Basques could extend their whaling expeditions way beyond the coastal shelf. Cod fishing was traditionally carried out while on whaling expeditions, and the exceptionally low fat content of cod made it particularly suited to curing. As the whale stocks of the Bay of Biscay dwindled, a galley-full of bacalao would enable the Basques to mount extended expeditions – first towards Galicia, then northwards to the summer breeding grounds of Iceland, the Outer Hebrides and the Faeroes. According to popular myth (and some fragments of historic evidence), the Basques pursued whale to Newfoundland years before either Cabot or Columbus made the crossing. Certainly they fished those northerly shores by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when cod were six feet long and plentiful, in contrast to the persecuted, scarce and diminutive specimens of today.

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It was the Basques who marketed cod products far and wide, and were responsible for making bacalao into the peasant staple of southern Europe. Its enduring popularity and legendary versatility (some sources claim thousands of bacalao recipes, but this seems to be stretching credulity) mean that it appears on menus all over Spain, perhaps with a predominance in Vizcaya, Galicia and the North. Recently I tried ensalada de bacalao with onion, red peppers in the Southern town of Algar and bacalao al Mozárabe - cod Moorish style, with grapes in a sweet sauce, in Priego de Córdoba. Empanada de bacalao con pasas, coliflor con bacalao, empanadillas de bacalao and chorizos de bacalao con pasas are just a few more sample dishes.

Bacalao is famous for its many uses and here's another. Stuck for a gift to buy? It's lightweight, easily transported, durable and nourishing. Give `em bacalao!

MORE ON COD:

Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World. Mark Kurlansky, Vintage, 1999. A 1,000-year history, and a story of the plundering of what was once one of the world's richest food sources.

By Richard Robinson

Richard Robinson is a UK-based travel writer specialising in Spain. Visit his favourite corner of Andalucía on

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This article first appeared in Living Spain magazine, a UK monthly publication.

Richard Robinson, the author, retains copyright of all submitted material. Where submitted material has already been published elsewhere it has been revised and updated. Richard Robinson is a freelance travel writer for The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Telegraph, The Times, Living Spain (all UK) and Americas (USA) among other publications.

Salt saves, salt kills.

By Dr. Donald A. Miller

Salt saves, salt kills. by Dr. Donald A. Miller

Salt is essential to health. This means sodium chloride and potassium chloride, with traces of other mineral salts.

If you sweat a lot at work or play, lack of salt can cause "heat stroke".

Salt can kill. Excess salt is probably the biggest dietary

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health risk factor after fats, in any country that uses a lot of prepared foods.

Avoid salty–fatty snack foods. Restrict the salt added to foods during cooking.

As a kid, I used to salt everything at meal time, often before even tasting. Now, any foods I prepare, I add no salt, outside of reduced salt versions of soy sauce. And I am very sensitive to the taste of excess salt in bought meals, canned goods, and other prepared foods.

* Diet with FACTS, not Fat–Burner MYTHS. *

For more pages in this health series, send blank email to snips@easyhealthdiet.com

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