

Chase Away the Autumn Blues with Cured Cod

A bright version of one of Russia's favorite fish.

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Cod is not inherently a sexy fish.

Cod's got nothing on salmon, and it can't really compete with tuna or snapper. At its freshest, cod can be an excellent base for some iconic dishes, including fish and chips, fish chowder, and, of course, Brandade de Morue (France's incomparable whipped cod and potato spread). But on its own it's pretty plain, and you'd never think that fierce wars were fought over it in the middle of the last century and that empires rose and fell on the strength of the cod trade.

I'm trying to see cod in a new light, and its centuries-long role as financial superpower makes it marginally more interesting. But that doesn't take away from its rather bland taste.

But embrace cod I must; my doctor has advised me to eat less red meat and make fish — and exercise, including strength training— more prominent aspects of what she aspirationally refers to as my “regular health and wellness regime.” I’m sure she’s right: in my line of work, high cholesterol is very much a common occupational hazard.

One successful tactic has been to fall back on cured fish, and so I’ve been having great fun experimenting with different flavors and different fish. Although cured salmon is a pantry staple in our house, I had not tried curing cod before. And that was my mistake, because cod becomes something truly amazing when you cure it with a few herbs, roots, salt, and sugar. What a difference! It’s as if cod suddenly emerged from a complete makeover. The result is silky, salty, with just a hint of sweetness, with a deeply authentic “fishy” flavor.

Curing fish offers an impressive effort to reward ratio, which is something to keep in mind as we cautiously flex our flabby, out-of-shape entertaining muscles: for about 7 minutes of hands-on time and 72 hours of hands-free time, you get an elegant dish that you can serve as a bombshell appetizer or alongside something equally scaled back such as buttered new potatoes with a few sprigs of dill. You’ll get asked where you keep your smokehouse.

There are a few rules of thumb to remember when curing fish. Always get the freshest fish you can — which is pretty universal advice, actually; I know of no recipe that says, “it doesn’t really matter what quality fish you get.” So try to get your fish as fresh as possible from a reliable fishmonger. Add a bit of alcohol to your cure: it will deepen the flavors and encourage the process. For best results, weigh the fish down with something: I put a baking sheet on top of the fish and then a few large tins of something or, better yet, two dumbbells.

Be very gentle when rinsing off the cure — ideally something slightly more energetic than a trickle — and pat the fish dry gently with a paper towel when you’ve finished.

The crostini below are a lovely way to enjoy cured cod: Russia’s dark, dense Borodinsky bread with its notes of coriander and molasses is a perfect foil for the tart flavors of cilantro and horseradish in the cure. These crostini are a perfect icebreaker at a cocktail party, an elegant side to the soup course, or as a light appetizer before a large meal.

And as soon as my next batch is done curing, I will use those dumbbells as nature — and my doctor — intended me to do!

Ingredients

For the cured cod

- 1 lb. (500 grams) fillet of cod
- ¼ cup (60 ml) aquavit or vodka
- ⅔ cup (150 ml) fresh cilantro
- ⅔ cup (150 ml) fresh parsley
- 1 Tbsp prepared horseradish
- 1 shallot
- 2 Tbsp sea salt
- ¼ cup (60 ml) sugar

For the crostini

- 1 loaf Borodinsky bread (or any other dark bread)
- 1/4 cup (60 ml) sour cream
- 1 lime
- 1 bunch of cilantro

Instructions

Note: The cod needs to cure for 72 hours, so plan accordingly.

- Place the cod skin side down on a large piece of plastic wrap.
- Combine the remaining ingredients in a food processor fitted with a steel blade and process until the mixture is a coarse wet paste.
- Spread the curing mixture over the surface of the fish, using gentle pressure to rub it into the flesh of the fish.
- Wrap the fish tightly in more plastic wrap, then place it on a baking sheet, cure side down and weight it down. Refrigerate for 72 hours.
- Rinse the fish under a gentle stream of cold water and pat dry. Slice thinly on a diagonal to serve.

To make the crostini

- Slice the bread into small squares and remove the crusts. Toast or grill the bread.
- Spread a thin layer of sour cream on each crostino, then pile it with thin slices of the cured cod and garnish with cilantro and a thin slice of lime.
- Other garnish ideas: capers, pickled onions, pickled gherkins, cocktail onions, snipped chives.

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