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A Classic Recipe for Marinated Fish and a Dark Page from the Soviet Past

By Russian Culinary Historians

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Courtesy of authors

Hunger, food scarcity and the isolation of the Soviet Union led to all kinds of culinary experiments and alternative food products that are now almost completely forgotten or unknown.

No one in their right mind would ever eat a dolphin unless you were desperately hungry. But this "outdated bourgeois stereotype" was shattered during the Soviet period.

Dolphin meat was not a part of pre-revolutionary cuisine. In Mikhail Vladykin's "Guide to the Caucasus" published in 1885, the author grimly described dolphin meat. "In the evening I went to see Adler. In front of a house on the shore were several feluccas (small craft with slanting sails). The owners had just come back from fishing. They skinned dolphins, which had a thick (7-9 cm) layer of fat. They put the fat and skin into cauldrons to boil and threw carcasses back into the sea. The strong surf threw them up on shore to the great delight of

pigs, who immediately ate them up. Dolphin meat is so disgusting that it can only be eaten by this unclean animal."

But these old prejudices were shattered by the Bolsheviks. In the early 1930s cows herded into collective farms quickly died or almost stopped producing milk. During times of famine, the knowledge and ability to come up with something to eat came in handy.

For example, how would you like to try smoked dolphin or dolphin breast? The "five-year public catering program" suggested introducing all sorts of new products in cafes and cafeterias: soy milk, milk sugar, pastilles made from albumin (a product made from cow blood) and dolphin meat.

"Based on our experiments," noted Soviet scientists in 1932, "it is proven that dolphin proteins and fats can be successfully assimilated by the body. Nutritious dolphin meat ... increases body weight."

These dolphin delicacies were supposed to be supplied to workers' canteens in Leningrad, where there was a severe food shortage.

In the book "The Technology of Meat Canning" (1932) the engineer P. I. Mikhailov noted that, "Today canning dolphin meat is being seriously developed. For example, in 1931 the Morszverprom trust killed 100,000 dolphins. Until recently, dolphin carcasses were mainly used in pharmaceuticals only for their fat. Some of the meat was smoked and the rest was used for fertilizer."

The Ukrainian Canning Industry Research Institute conducted experiments to can dolphin meat. Similar work was carried out at the Sevastopol and Kerch canneries.

"Preliminary data," the scientists noted, "show that it's possible to produce high-quality canned dolphin meat. There are several recipes for canned dolphin meat developed by Soyuzkonserva and the cannery in Sevastopol."

Here is the grim recipe:

"Dolphins are cleaned, i.e. the fillet is removed, the spine bone is chopped up, and everything is soaked in clean cold water for 24 to 36 hours.

The carcasses are boiled in copper cauldrons with bay leaf and peppercorns, preferably with coriander seeds, too. Fresh young dolphins are boiled for no more than one hour. Then the meat is cleaned from the bone, cooled and cut into small pieces of about 200 g. They are then put into a container without spices, covered with marinade, submerged and sterilized in an open cauldron for 2 1/2 hours."

In Sevastopol's Streletskaya Bay there was a factory for processing dolphins in the 1930s. Workers skinned them, made oil and grease from the fat, canned the meat and ground the bones into a powder for fertilizer. Dolphins were harpooned, netted and shot with guns. In 1936, 150,000 of these mammals were "harvested."

This barbaric extermination could not continue indefinitely. Soon the number of catches plummeted. And in 1966, the Soviet authorities banned dolphin fishing in the Black Sea.

But it would be wrong to think this was a sign of some latent humanity. It was just that there was a new promising source of seafood: ocean fish, which the Soviet Union began to catch in the mid-1960s. All kinds of fish with unfamiliar names like black rockcod, hake and pollock appeared on the shelves of Soviet stores. And instead of ubiquitous dolphin stew, a simple but delicious seafood dish became incredibly popular throughout the country.

Marinated fish was a universal dish in the Soviet period — a standard for weekdays or holidays, at home and in cafes and restaurants. And it's easy to make.

You can use any fish, with one caveat: make sure you remove all the bones first. The rest of the ingredients — carrots, onions, tomato paste, sunflower oil — are always at hand. The recipe itself is simple, and you can adjust it to your taste: you can add more vegetables, make it a bit spicier, or modify the combination of sugar, salt and vinegar to suit your taste right at the stove. The only requirement: for the best flavor, prepare this the day before so the fish will be imbued will all the flavors of the marinade.

Ingredients

- 1.5 kg (3.3 lbs) fish (cod, pikeperch, perch, hake)
- 2-3 large carrots
- 1 parsnip root
- 4 white onions
- 500 ml (a generous 2 c) tomato juice or pureed tomatoes
- 4 Tbsp tomato paste
- vegetable oil for frying fish
- flour for breading
- 1 ½ Tbsp sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- 2-3 Tbsp 9% table vinegar
- cloves, peppercorns, bay leaf

Instructions

- With a fish scaler or back of a knife blade scrape the scales off the fish skin, cut the fish into pieces of the same size, remove the bones, salt and leave for 30 minutes.
- Peel vegetables, cut into thin strips and fry in vegetable oil until golden. Set aside.
- Coat the fish pieces thoroughly in flour and fry over high heat. Set aside.
- Pour the tomato juice into a deep pan or saucepan, mix with the paste and simmer for 10 minutes.
- Add sugar, salt, vinegar and spices.
- Put the fish pieces into a pot, alternating layers of fish and vegetables. Cover with the tomato marinade.
- Stew for 30 minutes on low heat. Serve cooled, preferably the next day.

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