

## Tell me about Salted Fish

By Joseph Parish

During the 15th and 16th century, there was no such thing as refrigeration or canning so the professional fishermen of the Mediterranean had to preserve their daily catch by means of salting. Although salting was judged the most widespread method, the anglers also preserved their catch with oil or brine, air-drying and smoking. The most common fish used for salting was anchovies, sardines, tuna, eels, herring plus bottarga, which is Italian for tuna eggs.

The business of salting ocean products boomed throughout the Mediterranean as fishing villages began developing large thriving enterprises around their catches. The exports of the small fishing villages increase. In 1560, the anchovies salted and exported from Languedoc were sold in popularly Narbonne while 1500 salted eels were transported from Carcassonne to be sold in Toulouse. Without the practice of salting the fish, this long distant commerce simply could not have taken place,

Salted fish was profitable due in fact to the readily available supply of salt from the salt mines of Narbonne. The fish exported from the region was so popular that in 1423 the Archbishopric of Arles in southern France sent a buyer to Narbonne to purchase 54 salted eels as well as dried Tuna roe and the locally produced poutargue or Cod Roe.

Narbonne did not have a monopoly on the salting of their fish, as it was also a major preoccupation for the villages along the Croatian coast of the Adriatic Sea. There were extensive industries established specializing in the curing of sardines and anchovies as well as to a lesser degree, mackerel and garfish.

Most of these industries were family owned and operated. The fisherman would take his boat out and net the fish wash them in the salted seawater and then carefully pack them in small pine boxes with salt being spread between each layer. A weight was placed on the top to close the air gaps and to press out the brine. This process would be completed repeatedly until about fifteen hundred were compressed.

In times of bad harvests around the Mediterranean area, everyone would await the arrival of the northern grain ship, which also brought an abundant supply of salted fish.

It was the discovery of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland that led to a large trade in Codfish between the north Atlantic countries and those of the Mediterranean coast. This large scale fishing area was in use as early as the 15th century by Basques and Irish fishermen. In Mediterranean countries salted

cod is a popular well-known product although most of it is imported from the north Atlantic.

There were several reasons that would account for the influx of imported Cod from the North Atlantic Countries. Foremost, is the general lack of this species of fish within the Mediterranean Sea. In the 1270's salted herring was sold to Sicily and Palestine although it did not amount to a hefty trade item. The importation of codfish from the north amplified not because of an increased demand for the merchandise but because of the encouraging trade circumstances resulting from the Norwegian food scarcity of 1315. King Haakon of Norway proclaimed that the export of butter and stockfish would only permit those nations that could import flour, malt, and salt in their place.

As an added treat, I would like to present a home version of drying fish.

To commence, fill a shallow box or dish pan with dry salt. On the bottom of the brining container, sprinkle a thin layer of rock salt. Encase each piece of meat in salt and place carefully in the container.

When salting your fish, place the large pieces with the backbone next to the brine container wall. If needed an extra piece of fish may be placed in the middle so that each layer will be level. Overlap the fish as little as possible. Disperse a thin layer of the salt between each layer of fish. Pack the top layer of your fish, both the large and small pieces with the skin side up.

It is hard to estimate the amount of salt to use as it depends on the amount of meat used, the season of the year and length of preservation desired. A general rule to follow is to use one part salt to three parts of meat.

Your final salted meat can be pickled, smoked or used in any recipe calling for fish, but it must be first freshened in cold water. Soaking your fish in cold water for eight to forty-eight hours while in the refrigerator should work well. Change the water often to get rid of the salt. Should further freshening be necessary put the meat in a pan of cold water to cover and bring to a quick boil and then simmer slowly.

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