

## **SEAFOOD MEMOIRS, Part 1**

Forty-six hundred and nineteen years ago, I was a kid growing up in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn (latitude and longitude available from Google Maps).

In those days there was a sizeable Scandinavian component to the local population, and most of the delicatessens (the origin of today's word "deli") within walking distance of our apartment were owned by Norwegian or Danish families. It was to them that my mother turned on Fridays when - in those blissful pre-Vatican II days - all good Catholic families had to count on fish in one form or another for dinner.

My mother, God rest her kind soul, was not particularly adventurous when it came to feeding her family, and sensibly enough she tended to stick with winning combinations like fish cakes and baked beans. But we kids knew that there were other, far more exotic edibles available, delicacies with names like "fiskeboller" and "lutefisk". We didn't know much about them, and inquiries to our Scandic stickball buddies didn't go very far, e.g. "So Nils, what are these fiskeboller things you guys eat?" (Note that ethnic stereotyping - as in "you guys" - was not only not discouraged, but was a way of life in those simple distant Brooklyn days. Any hyphenated Italian or Irish kid will testify to the truth of this.)

"I don't know," Nils would reply. "My mother makes them. Some kind of chopped fish and breadcrumbs and stuff. They're not bad." "And lutefisk" (pronounced by us, naturally if not accurately, as 'lootfisk') " - what's that?" Vague rumors had reached us that it was a weird dish even by Scandinavian standards, something that could only be properly appreciated by elderly harpoon fishermen living in igloos above the Arctic Circle. But again pal Nils was no help. "I don't know exactly what lutefisk is - my folks are Danish, and I guess Danes don't eat it. My Aunt Lil is Norwegian and she loves it. Sometimes after a few drinks they all argue about it, but I don't speak enough of the language to know what they're saying. I'm not sure they know either."

And so we seekers after Seafood Truth came away empty-handed. Thank heavens we had fishcakes, which we all understood and appreciated. Even after all these years, I approach a meal of fishcakes, baked beans, and cole slaw with something like love, not only for the nourishment value but also for the happy memories of childhood that are intrinsic to these simple foods.

Another childhood seafood memory that I cherish involves my best high school pal, or - more specifically for the purposes of this reminiscence - his mother. The family were Italian, and Aunt Joan was a splendid cook whose specialty was linguini with white clam sauce. I always found an excuse to be around their house on Friday evenings so I'd be asked to stay for dinner (e.g. "Hey, Aunt Joan - got any windows that need washing?")

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But one Friday as I dived into my usual two-foot pile of pasta, I caught sight of Aunt Joan opening a can of Chef Boyardee ravioli. I was speechless at the strange spectacle - you always saw Chef Boyardee products in pantries belonging to adventurous Polish or Jewish or Scottish families, but I couldn't figure out what this can was doing in that sanctuary of honest-to-God Italian cuisine that was Aunt Joan's kitchen. She saw me watching. "It's for Robert," she said with a sigh, referring to my pal. "He won't eat my cooking. And he especially hates white clam sauce, so when I make it I have to feed him this."

The contents of the upturned can plopped forlornly into the saucepan, and I returned with a renewed appreciation to my obscene pile of pasta. I loved the both of them, but at that moment there was a new and strange bond between me and Aunt Joan, a surrogate sonship fuelled? lubricated? by white clam sauce.

It was also the first time I realized that friends can be really weird.

About that same time, I had my first up-close-and-personal experience with molluscs, and I'm prepared to agree with anyone who says you never forget your first time.

We used to spend summers in West Falmouth, and one of our neighbors was a local who convinced me that a day spent with borrowed rake and bucket out on Great Sippewissett Marsh would lead me inexorably into the pleasures of fresh shellfish. Accordingly I was out on the marsh with the next low tide, loading quahogs right and left into my bucket until the tide turned and the sun got too hot. I proudly carried my precious booty home, visions of delicious chowders and deep-fried golden delights and scrumptious linguini accompaniments dancing in my head.

The only problem was that I had no idea how to open the quahogs. The neighbor wasn't around, and there wasn't anyone else around I could trust for a correct answer. Trying to pry open the shell with a screwdriver was a total failure, and I understood the origin of the phrase "clam up". But maybe a hammer would work ... ?

The neighbor returned an hour or so later and nearly peed himself laughing at the sight of the city boy bashing away at the poor innocent quahogs with a ball-peen hammer. "There's an easier way to do that," he managed to stammer between hoots of laughter, and once he explained the whole scenario to me, it made a lot of sense.

It took me another few hours and my mother's eyebrow tweezers to clean the pieces of smashed shell out of the meat (I found out later that I didn't get them all). By that time I was tired of the whole misadventure and was very sorry I had disrupted the lives of so many harmless quahogs for absolutely no purpose. I took the remaining victims of my indiscretion down to the beach and released them back to the only life they had ever known. I could have sworn I heard them uttering little molluscy sounds of gratitude, and I was glad we parted friends.

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As the horizons of my life expanded beyond my Brooklyn boyhood, I became acquainted with other varieties of the seafood experience. For example: the year I served with the Navy in Vietnam involved becoming acquainted with a product called “nuoc mam” (rhymes with “Look Mom!”), the local variety of fermented fish sauce much loved throughout Asia. I am sworn to lifelong secrecy about the details (well, not really) but suffice it to say that our patrol boats could detect a coastal vessel carrying a cargo of nuoc mam at a downwind distance of about five miles (twenty miles in the summer).

Our patrol guys, God bless them, would generally find excuses not to board and inspect these craft, and even the RVN naval liaison officers - who had grown up around the stuff - weren't too enthused about poking around in hot cramped cargo holds full of it. One can only speculate how much contraband could have been smuggled south across the DMZ hidden under the containers of nuoc mam; I never heard about any during my year there but then again I didn't have a military “need to know”.

Later on in life I found out how nuoc mam and similar products from other Asian societies are manufactured, and I can attest that there is in fact such a thing as knowing too much. Was it Doctor Johnson who said that we would be happier not knowing how laws and sausages are made? I'm willing to bet he would have added nuoc-mam to the list if he had known about it.

Another Oriental seafood experience happened during my first visit to Hong Kong, whose seafood restaurants routinely feature tanks of live fish from which patrons are expected to choose their meals. Not being an avid hunter or fisherman, I had never been expected to experience such an intimate relationship with my dinner before, and it made me uncomfortable enough for me to change my mind about the whole ethnic-dining thing. If I remember right, I went back to the hotel and had a Caesar salad. They offered to bring the lettuce for me to examine but I politely declined - I didn't want to get into that whole commitment/betrayal thing again.

Back in the States prior to discharge, I was stationed briefly in San Diego, a lovely little town (this was 1967) where I discovered the delights of abalone. I loved it Italian style and Chinese style and I would probably have loved it prepared in other styles too. I was reading recently that it's now difficult if not impossible to obtain abalone anymore because of over-fishing.

Of course we all know that sea otters love abalone as much as we do, so if the abalone stocks are down, the population of sea-otters might be down too. A pity - I happen to like sea-otters and am more than willing to share my allotment of abalone with them if they ask nicely (waving their adorable little paws around would help).

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Once we moved to the Cape permanently in 1979, we took full advantage of the availability of all the wonderful seafood the area has to offer. As washashores we struggled with the identity of scrod, knew instinctively that horseshore crabs wouldn't be very good eating, and weren't sure what to make of the term "trash fish". We thought that clam bellies - like horse mackerel - might have a wider appeal with a change of name. Mussels were terrific if you didn't mind eating anything that had probably been scraped off a dock somewhere. We discovered that ingesting a pound or so of sand in a bucket of steamers probably wouldn't kill you. We found out from the Cajun cook on an ocean-going tug that you can manufacture reasonable substitutes for golf balls if you boil scallops - not native to the bayous of Louisiana - for two or three hours. (But what that man could do with shrimp! ...)

It would be difficult for me to name my favorite seafood dish. I admit that I would tend to avoid more exotic presentations involving jellyfish, sea urchins, anemones, and other species not normally associated with human consumption, but that's strictly a matter of personal taste - I'm not crazy about crawdads or catfish either, regardless of how popular they are elsewhere in this great nation.

So let us all raise our glasses of respectable little white wines and toast our finny/shelled brethren who make life so pleasant for us, especially here on the beautiful peninsula of Cape Cod.

(By the way - lutefisk, as I found out later in life, is codfish boiled in lye until it assumes a jelly-like consistency. It's hard to figure how any nationality as eminently reasonable and respectable as the Norwegians could find any redeeming social value in this concept but then again you could ask the same question about our own compatriots who invented, and continue to revel in the existence and widespread availability of, hush puppies. As the Romans - who ate a lot weird stuff themselves - would say, *de gustibus non disputandum est*. I couldn't have said it better myself).

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