

Creamed Cod

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Growing up with a Portuguese mother sometimes proved to be a challenge. Like most kids, I hated fish: the pungent smell, the slimy texture, the tiny bones. But few love fish, especially cod, more than the Portuguese.

“We can cook *bacalhau* in a hundred and one ways,” Mother boasted. “Nobody makes it like we do.”

Portugal’s love affair with cod dates back to the XV century when Portuguese explorers got lost on their way to India and ended up in Terra Nova, an island off the coast of Canada where cod was plentiful.

In our home, cod was baked, fried, smothered in onions, and turned into croquettes and, of course, Mother made me eat every last bit of it. Stinky cod was what I called it every time I caught a whiff of its briny scent in our kitchen. Butterflied cuttings of salted cod hung from the window like weathered wooden planks waiting to be soaked and continually rinsed for two days before getting tossed into a simmering pot of water for five minutes to be later skinned and shredded into feathery bits.

Mother’s favorite dish was creamed cod. She started with the béchamel sauce by melting butter on the stove, stirring in some flour with a wooden spoon, and cooking it until it released a nutty scent. Then she added some milk with a sprinkle of nutmeg

and continued stirring, without pause, until the mixture thickened and was finished with some heavy cream, salt, and pepper. Thinly sliced onions were sautéed with crushed garlic, and potatoes were cut into small cubes and fried. All was then combined in a clay pot and topped with a mixture of grated Parmesan cheese and breadcrumbs dotted with butter and baked until golden brown. Creamed cod was served for Christmas dinner, birthdays and any other celebration Mother saw fit and, of course, on many Fridays during lent.

As I got older, I avoided cod at all costs. No matter how fancy it looked on a restaurant menu, disguised under alluring appetizers with French names like *Brandade* (salted cod mixed into a puree with olive oil and milk) or sophisticated Italian main courses like *Baccalà alla Livornese* (cod loin covered in crushed tomatoes, capers and olives), I'd immediately shift my gaze away to the meat options.

When I got pregnant with my daughter Emma, I started having cravings right away. No, not for cod. That would've been interesting. I craved tomatoes. Something I had never cared for except for ketchup on my French fries. Gladly, I was living in Providence, Rhode Island, at the time, a town bustling with Italian restaurants that helped satisfy my incessant urge to devour all variations of tomato sauce: Marinara, Bolognese, and Arrabbiata to name a few. I also bought kilos of tomatoes, poached them to make Mexican salsa, roasted them to make soup, ate them whole with a sprinkle of salt, and even made them into marmalade.

As soon as my mother found out I was pregnant, she made arrangements to visit. Sadly, she passed away unexpectedly from a heart attack two days before her flight from Lisbon to Providence. Heartbroken, I spent my days curled up in bed trying to make sense of it all. Here I was, having to say goodbye to my mother yet having to muster the enthusiasm to decorate a baby's room and buy onesies to welcome my daughter.

Moments after Emma was born, she opened her eyes, and immediately, I saw Mother's perky spirit in them. Later that night, after Emma was taken back to the hospital nursery and my husband had gone home to feed the dogs, I fell asleep for a couple of hours and, upon waking, I saw a nurse walk into my room holding a tray with food. She placed the tray on the overbed table and swiveled it toward me. I sat up and lifted the metal cover, finding a mound of something white covered in golden brown breadcrumbs that released a familiar scent.

“Baked scrod,” said the nurse.

Famished, I pierced my fork into the crumbly mixture and, without hesitation, took a bite. The crunchy, buttery crust, the thick, silky white sauce, and the tender, flaky fish tickled my tastebuds with memories of my childhood. I found myself taking slow bites, savoring every bit of the hospital’s version of creamed cod, wrapping myself in the warmth of what felt like a thick, fuzzy blanket, feeling Mother’s presence right there with me.

My war against cod was over. Thereafter, the once-loathed fish turned into a meaningful staple in my household. So much so that I became known as the queen of cod amongst my closest friends when, as per their request, I made creamed cod the main meal at every dinner party. It has also turned out to be Emma’s favorite dish. Surely, she got much more than just Mother’s perky, brown eyes.