

Baccalà in Venice, Cod in the World

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35 JOHN CABOT HOUSE, VIA GIUSEPPE GARIBALDI
SESTIERE OF CASTELLO

A fish wraps its body around a jug as white as fresh milk. *Gastronomia Rurale* (“rural gastronomy”) depicts the first fruits of the season. In Simone Carraro’s 2018 series of paintings these fruits are animals. One profiles game (*selvaggina*), another a young male chicken paired with new wine (*galletto e vino novello*), and another stars *baccalà*.

“Follow the chicken and find the world,” writes Donna Haraway.¹ What do you find if you follow the cod? Follow the cod and find Venice. Here it is not called cod, of course, but *baccalà*. And *baccalà* is not fresh cod but dried. Just like the fish itself, this word swims widely, crossing one language and then another. *Baccalà* likely stems from the old Dutch *Bakeljaun*, which Spanish turned into *bacalao*. Stockfish is dried fish without salt, and usually cod. And as its name makes obvious, salt cod is both salted and dried. Somewhat confusingly, however, *baccalà* is salt cod rather than stockfish – *stoccafisso* – but in Venice the terms are interchangeable.

The history of *baccalà*, writes Rosa Maria Rossomando Lo Torto, “has its origins in the Serenissima’s mercantile and ship-owning activities, from the vocation of a city that made the sea its land and, above all, from the intertwining of cultural, economic and religious relations that have always existed between men.”² And environmental relations, too.

Follow the cod and find Norway. The story goes that the 15th century Venetian captain Pietro Querini introduced stockfish to

1. HARAWAY, DONNA. *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press 2007, 274.
2. ROSSOMANDO LO TORTO, ROSA MARIA. *Veneto Cuisine*, lineadacqua 2020, 8.

Venice. In 1432 Querini's crew was shipwrecked near Norway's Lofoten Islands. Fishermen not only rescued them, but also introduced them to their codfish riches. Querini observed how locals employed the sun and wind to dry the cod. Once hardened, they softened the sheets by beating them with hatchet handles. Comparing it to "minted coin" in "unlimited amounts", Querini returned to Venice with an abundance of dried cod.³

Follow the cod and find Newfoundland in Venice. Where Via Garibaldi meets Riva degli Schiavoni, a plaque marks the house that was once Giovanni Caboto's. "1497", it announces in Italian, English, and French, "John Cabot, Venetian and his son Sebastian discovered Newfoundland in the service of Henry VII of England". Erected by the province of Newfoundland to mark "the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the expedition of John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto's name in Canada), the Canadian and British governments appointed Cape Bonavista, Newfoundland, as Caboto's first landing site".

On the second of three voyages, Cabot coasts the shores of what is now Newfoundland and Labrador. A crew member wakes him up. "You won't believe your eyes", he teases. They scurry to the bow and witness a sea that has more fish than water. "Codfish so thick they slowed the progress of our ship", he later reports to King Henry VII. One could catch them by simply lowering a basket into the water: "Fish enough to feed this kingdom...until the end of time". This marks the beginning of the Cod Rush. An example of how fish claims land and creates wealth. In the half century after Cabot's voyage, more than half of all fish eaten in Europe was dried North Atlantic cod.⁴

"Until the end of time", Cabot had promised. But time ended on July 2, 1992. Newfoundland's fishery collapsed because the spawning biomass stock had fallen to 1 per cent of its peak:

3. SPECTOR, SALLY. *Venice and its Food*, Elzeviro 2020, 144.

4. BERRY, DAVID. "Cod Moratorium of 1992", in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, August 6 (2020).

an “Aquacalypse”:⁵ Newfoundland cod, however, should have lasted forever. Only one century prior, the Canadian Ministry of Agriculture claimed “Unless the order of nature is overthrown, for centuries to come our fisheries will continue to be fertile”.⁶ But the entanglement between human appetites, fish as commodities, and technological developments overthrew nature’s order in the Northwest Atlantic.

Cod no longer rules Newfoundland’s economy. Yet, it still dominates its culture, as exemplified by “screeching-in.” Imported from Jamaica, screech is rum that is blended and bottled in Newfoundland. A ritual that is performed in a pub on a “come from away” or “mainlander”, one shoots the screech and kisses the cod. After answering “Is you a Newfoundlander?” with “Long may your big jib draw!”, a cod fish – usually frozen but sometimes fresh – is held up to lip-level to steal a kiss. Some see this as cheap tourist entertainment, but others argue its heritage is older and that it re-enacts initiation rituals at sea.

Venetians do not kiss cod, but they eat it. Lots of it. Just as Cabot chronicled the Northwest Atlantic’s abundance, one can say the same about Venetian restaurants. *Baccalà* is everywhere – from *bacari* (snack bars) to high-end restaurant menus. Follow the cod and find Venice-in-the-world. Follow the cod and find the world-in-Venice.

Like any dish that is eaten with the same enthusiasm with which nations hang flags, *baccalà* comes with many a story on the side. Follow the cod and find Carraro’s *Gastronomia Rurale*. Follow the cod and find recipes like *Baccalà mantecato*⁷ – dried cod plumped with garlic and olive oil, salt and pepper –, *Baccalà alla vicentina*, which adds milk, or *Baccalà alla capuccina*, which

5. PROBYN, ELSPETH. *Eating the Ocean*, Duke University Press 2016, 13. She quotes marine biologist Daniel Pauly.
6. KURLANSKY, MARK. *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*, Penguin 1997, 32.
7. However, to the horror of Venetians, Pellegrino Artusi titled this dish *Baccalà montebianco* in his magnum opus. ARTUSI, PELLEGRINO. *La scienza in cucina e l’arte di mangiar bene*, Giunti 2009 [1891], 115.

contributes butter alongside milk, raisins, and pine nuts.

Baccalà is a reminder that a cuisine tells tales on plates and at tables, in hands and aboard ships, at home and in restaurants. A cuisine remembers foods that have been lost, environments that have been transformed, plants and animals that we have nearly eaten to extinction, and just how entangled the world tastes.



Simone Carraro, *Gastronomia Rurale – Baccalà*
("Rural Gastronomy – Cod"), 2018, acrylic, soil, and ink on raw fabric.