

Baked salt cod with caramelized onions and potatoes

Bacalhau à Gomes de Sá

Serves 4

14 ounces/400 g potatoes, such as Yukon gold or similar
3 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
4 onions, thinly sliced
Flaky sea salt and ground white pepper
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped, plus 1 halved garlic clove
10 ounces/300 g cured cod (see below, but cure it for only 20 minutes)
3 eggs
A small handful of black olives, sliced into rings
A handful of parsley leaves, finely chopped
Extra-virgin olive oil, to serve

There are at least 365 salt cod recipes in Portuguese cuisine, one for every day of the year, but this is one of the few that everyone knows. *Bacalhau à Gomes de Sá* was created in a restaurant in Porto, where the chef, after whom the dish is named, was the son of a cod merchant who had gone bankrupt. He apparently said, “If you change anything in this recipe, it won’t be good,” but I have to say I don’t agree with him. I have replaced dried salt cod with freshly cured cod, which makes the dish creamy rather than salty. Make sure the onions are caramelized slowly, to bring out their sweetness.

Preheat the oven to 410°F/210°C (convection 375°F/190°C). Cook the potatoes in boiling salted water until soft but not mushy, then drain. Once cool enough to handle, cut horizontally into 1/3-inch/1-cm slices.

Heat the olive oil in a pan over medium heat. Add the onions and cook gently for 10 minutes, until soft, and season well with salt and pepper. Add the chopped garlic and cook until fragrant. Increase the heat slightly to caramelize the onions, stirring well to ensure they don’t stick. Once they are caramelized and sweet, remove the pan from the heat.

Oil the bottom of a large ovenproof baking dish and rub it with the halved garlic clove. Cut the cod into bite-size chunks. Make an even layer of potatoes on the bottom of the dish, then one of onions, followed by one of cod. Repeat with another layer of each and finish with a layer of potatoes and onions. Cover with a lid or foil and bake for 25 minutes, or until golden brown and cooked through, removing the lid after 10 minutes.

Put the eggs in a pan of cold water, ensuring they are fully covered. Bring the water to a boil over high heat, then remove the pan from the heat, cover, and leave for 10 minutes. Put the eggs in iced water to stop the cooking and peel them once cool.

Just before serving, slice the eggs into wedges. Scatter the eggs, olives, and parsley on top of the potatoes and onions. Serve hot, straight from the baking dish, with a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil.

Hearty cod and cilantro broth

Açorda de bacalhau

For the cured cod

7 tablespoons/90 g superfine sugar
 3 1/2 tablespoons/60 g fine sea salt
 Aromatics of your choice, such as bay leaves, coriander seeds, cilantro, parsley, orange and lemon zest, fennel seeds, black peppercorns, and perhaps a cinnamon stick for warmth

2 (5-ounce/150 g) skinless, pinboned cod fillets of an even thickness (the top, fatter part of the loin is ideal)

For the cod broth

2 tablespoons olive oil
 7 ounces/200 g cod trimmings (ask your fishmonger)
 2 garlic cloves, crushed

For the açorda

3 tablespoons olive oil
 2 garlic cloves, crushed
 A small bunch of cilantro, stalks finely chopped and leaves picked
 Flaky sea salt and ground white pepper
 2 slices sourdough or other rustic loaf
 A handful of mint leaves
 Extra-virgin olive oil, to serve

Açorda was invented during times of deep poverty, when ingredients had to be stretched in unfathomable ways.

But despite its frugality, it's a soup we Portuguese truly love. A pan of fish stock mixed with garlic, cilantro, and olive oil, poured over a nice piece of cod and a slice of stale sourdough bread, is a brilliant example of how simple yet full of flavor our cooking can be.

I love to cure fish because it draws the moisture out of the flesh, which means it has a nicer texture and cooks more evenly. I use a ratio of 6 parts sugar to 4 parts salt (by weight), which enhances the natural sweetness of the fish. You can also add other flavorings, depending on the final dish (see left for suggestions). The possibilities are endless, so experiment! You could try curing halibut, bream, bass, mackerel, or sole and matching them with different seasonings.

To cure the cod — Whisk together the sugar, salt, and aromatics, ensuring they are well combined. Spread half the cure over the bottom of a small baking sheet. Put the fish on top and cover with the remaining cure. Set aside for 20 to 30 minutes at room temperature. It's worth checking sooner than you expect, rather than overcuring it; it should feel tighter and firmer. Rinse off the cure and pat dry with paper towels.

To make the cod broth — Heat the olive oil in a pan over medium heat. Add the cod trimmings, garlic, and 1 quart/1 L water, then simmer gently for 20 to 30 minutes. Remove from the heat, cover, and leave to infuse for another 30 minutes.

To make the açorda — Heat the olive oil in a pan over low heat. Add the garlic and cilantro stalks and cook gently for 5 minutes, until soft and fragrant. Season with salt and pepper. Pour in the cod broth and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low, add the cured cod, and poach for 5 minutes, until just starting to flake gently apart. Stir in the cilantro leaves and taste for seasoning. Toast the bread. To serve, place a slice of toast in each bowl with a few mint leaves on top. Spoon the cod and broth over the toast, adding a little more broth than you think you need, as the bread will absorb a lot. Drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil and serve.



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