

Some Everyday Rituals Around Food and Eating: A Conversation about Pickled Fish

Donna Andrews and Suzall Timm

Particular foods carry very poignant and profound meanings - about spaces, emotions, relationship and social identities. Pickled fish, eating by many *Cape Townians* on Good Friday, might have origins in Christian observations about not eating meat, or the distinctively sweet-sour flavours of Cape Malay cooking. Its popularity over the years might even have something to do with the usefulness of a form of food preparation that doesn't require the effort of labour over a long weekend, or the value of a dish that is easy to preserve at a time when many travel away from home. Whatever these origins (and they are definitely multiple), pickled fish, like many other South African popular dishes that are not considered "*truly* indigenous" or "*really* traditional", has acquired distinctive value among those who have learned to enjoy and share it at particular times of the year. And the pleasure of the actual eating of the dish has often been part of the pleasurable process of procuring or buying fish (queuing at certain fish shops and chatting to the seller before choosing it, getting the best deal through "connections"), buying spices that are now often sold over Easter as "pickled fish spices"), choosing the fish that works best (does it in fact *have* to be a white deep sea fish or does *snoek* also work), comparing different methods (whose family/mother/aunt, or maybe even father) prepared it better? So, pickled fish is incredibly ritualized, gesturing towards the complex networks and affiliations that eating and tasting - both individually and collectively - so often give rise to, and making one sharply aware of the complexities and fluidities of, among other things, "culture", "indigeneity" and "identity". In this conversation, Donna Andrews and Suzall Timm reflect on these and other processes.

Dear Suzall,

It struck me that it might be rather odd carrying pickled fish back to Johannesburg (JHB) post Easter. Moreover, it was a rather precarious food to be carrying on a flight. It crossed my mind that I could buy it upon arrival in JHB at Woollies and that maybe even Spar might still have pre-packed pickled fish. Why all this hassle? What was important about taking homemade pickled fish back to JHB to share with my friends who did not make it back to Cape Town over Easter? What was so special about taking what I assume to be a Cape delicacy, made in a particular geographical space and at a certain time to JHB friends? Besides: the dish is made of pickled fish and onions—curried with bay leaves, spices and is yellow in colour made with tons of vinegar and sugar. Surely this is not everyone's idea of a treat!



I came back to JHB not with one sample of pickled fish but a tasting menu from my mom's; my partner's and aunt's pickled fish. They each made it differently and with different types of fish. My aunt is traditional, insisting that it must be made with yellow tail, x-days before the time and with white vinegar but did not want to reveal all my gran's secrets. My mom's pickle is testimony to her – non-traditional and non-stereotypical methods - whilst making it palatable for all (so less vinegar and no sugar). She also avoids the traditional fish one associates with pickled fish. My partner's mom combines the traditional with my favourite fish (snoek) and made for her son's pallet – she was on the job for weeks. Scouting for the best prices and as snoek from her fish monger. She requires special pickled fish spice from Fargo trading store. She is relentless. Her story of the pickled fish is the hunt for the spice, the smelling and finding of the perfect bay leaves, the type of onion and feeling that its has the correct firmness and sweet smell, it is standing and talking with unfamiliar people about something that is familiar over Easter. It is an intimate dance with others to commune collectively.

Across many pickled fish meals, the chatter and numerous discussions ensued which fish was on the green or red list; which was in or out of season; how expensive the fish is etc. People seemed aware of WWF-SASSI list. The marketing and branding of the green economy and concerns about climate change is in full flight. An engagement about the politics and culture of fish and the fisher folk and how we live in relation to fish and fishing communities is however absent at the table.

In writing, it occurs to me that “being in conversation with the pickled fish” is about “who is the fish?” and “the fishing community.” This is a continuation of an analysis I started in my dissertation about fish as part of nature and part of larger web of life. In other words, it is much more than food or fish as a highly nutritional protein. Fish is political, cultural and social or as Da Costa argues polyvalent. My analysis makes visible the relationship between the fish and those who catch, prepare, sell and eat it. It puts forward that the fish intrinsically linked and embedded within social relations and is part of nature. Reducing fish to economics asserts one type of value above others. Reducing fish to the sale of fish as food in the market is to place food outside of its multi-dimensional and multi-layered ambit.

The study by Isaacs shows the relevance and significance of fish as part of community networks, livelihood and solidarity. Drawing on her study, I argue that for these working class poor communities in the Cape, fish is not frozen, packaged hake bought in the hypermarket, or farmed salmon and trout found in the chilled aisles of expensive supermarkets like Woolworths. Fish is snoek. It is what is bought at the end of day on the main road in your area, or on Sunday morning near the graveyard. It is bought from the local fish seller out of the back of his bakkie. It is a personal interaction – you decide which fish, how you want it cut whilst you chat with the seller and hear about the state of fishing and how the fishermen are doing. It is Sunday afternoons with the family, playing cards or dominoes. It is learning how to count, laugh and be communal. It is social and cultural cohesion. It is about the collective contribution to getting the fish to the table. The collecting of the money, buying, cleaning, preparing, serving, disposing of the bones, are all part of a whole. Everyone has a role when the fish is socially embedded outside the formal market. This fish is life, history, community, cultural and communion. This, however, has increasingly come under threat due to the commodification and commercialisation of fisheries.

Suzall, I look forward to hearing about your pickle fish delights and reflections.

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Donna,

Your conception of who is the fish in your piece is very appealing leading me to think of the fish on the plate with the hot cross buns as a ‘regulatory space’ that organises social life during Easter.

It all started during lunch break at the office when my colleague shared some of his pickled fish with me. He makes pickled fish every year over Easter. I was taken aback that Muslims also make pickled fish. I grew up learning that pickled fish and hot cross buns is what ‘Christians’ do. I recall asking my mother a Thursday night after cutting countless onions, “why do we eat pickled fish on Easter Friday?” She explained, “the fish signifies the body of Christ. We do not eat meat on Easter Friday because meat symbolises the flesh of Jesus Christ who suffered for us on the cross.” She then added, “it is for this reason, we eat pickled fish and hot cross buns to remember how he died on the cross and resurrected on the third day.” The story sounded fascinating and I left it at the idea of the fish and hot cross buns as the way of honouring the memory of Christ on the cross.

This year, after discovering that pickled fish is not only made by Christians, I went home to Worcester thinking more carefully about pickled fish and who makes it. Over the past 10 years, I journey by train to Worcester over the Easter period to eat my mother’s pickled fish and hot cross buns. While travelling on the train I overhear a young ‘Coloured’ woman tired after a day of working asking an older Xhosa woman where she is travelling to. The woman told her she is going to Worcester and she is looking forward to her aunt’s pickled fish. The young

woman in surprise looked at her and asked – do you also eat pickled fish? The older woman nodded and said yes, we do. The young woman smiled and said she never knew that Xhosas eat pickled fish. The older woman smiled and said just like you we also eat pickled fish and hot cross buns.

As I sit down, in the kitchen in Worcester, I have one piece of snoek pickled fish and a piece of hake pickled with two hot cross buns on my plate. While eating this fish, the many years of eating from this plate, no longer symbolises the body of Christ instead I reflect on the conversations with my colleague, the women on the train and the story my mother told me many years ago...



The plate, pickled fish and hot cross buns with butter represents what Bruno Latour would call a collective or assemblage of animate and inanimate actants. I will refer to this collective of animate and inanimate actants as a 'regulatory space' that produce effects and regulate how we interact with others and the plate during Easter.

The plate and the silver tin foil in which the buns are assembled are regulators that come alive and shapes the way we engage with each other. Both are mediators of relationships that links us to our taste buds, to family, friends and many others.

The pickled fish and hot cross buns on the plate play a regulatory role during the Easter period. This collective does not normally go together any other time of the year except for Easter. For Christians, this collective comes together to act as a symbol of remembering the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Luke 24:41, Jesus showed his hands and feet to his disciples who did not believe him. He asked them if they have anything to eat and the disciples gave him a piece of fish which he took and ate in their presence. The act of eating the fish was to dispel the disbelief of his disciples. However, every Easter the plate of fish and hot cross buns is a religious symbol for Christians as they reflect on Christ's sacrifice and the wondrous miracle of his resurrection.

The plate of pickled fish and hot cross buns collective also regulates how mothers and daughters interact in its production. It has become a site of intergenerational sharing of knowledge where mothers pass their knowledge – whether it's in the form of a story or a recipe to their daughters.

The plate of pickled fish and hot cross buns collective also regulates the social interactions that happens around it. Family and friends gather around the plate on Easter weekend and connect with each other.

The significance of the 'regulatory space' in the production of food and culture is to show how we are all equal parts in the partaking of food. The living, the organic, the animate and inanimate are simultaneously objects and subjects, key actants in the 'regulatory space' making food knowledges and experiences different yet similar through the plate and the tin foil in which the buns come in.