

In Code We Trust

Posted by [Marc Silver](#) of [National Geographic Magazine](#) May 20, 2011 [Comments](#)

Scoff not at the cod with its whiskered chin, its wide-eyed look of perpetual surprise, its mottled brown sides the color of North Sea Crude. There are homelier fish, to be sure, but looks aren't everything. Dried to leathery hardness, reconstituted by soaking in water for three days, simmered in a pot for three or four hours, served over polenta—miracolo—why it's a dish worthy of a doge: *bacala vicentina*.

In Vicenza, the capital of Italy's Veneto region for which the dish is named, *bacala vicentina* is as close to being a cultural treasure as you can get. Vicenza—which is 35 miles inland from Venice, famous as the home of the great 16th century architect Andrea Palladio, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, knows a thing or two about cultural treasures.

Marco Polo may have bought jade, silk, and ivory back home to Venice, but his countryman Piero Querini brought dried cod. Querini, a Venetian captain, had been shipwrecked in 1432 off the coast of Norway on Rost, one of the Lofoten Islands, where cod is caught in winter and dried on wooden racks. The sea-blessed Venetians may not have been initially impressed with the too, too solid sides of dried cod he brought back, but the good people of Vicenza, who lived 38 miles inland from la Serenissima, immediately understood the advantage of a fish immune to spoilage.

As the *ne plus ultra* of fish dishes in Vicenza it is only fitting that *bacala vicentina* has its very own fan club. It is called the *Confraternite di Bacala*, the Brotherhood of Cod. The brethren wear gray and gold robes—gray in a nod to the pearl grey back of the codfish, gold for the polenta that is the classic accompaniment to the dish, and each member is knighted, by a tap on the shoulder with a side of dried cod. To be a Brother of the Cod is to take on the solemn duty of protecting the integrity of *bacala vicentina* and spreading the gospel to others.

Which is why I was among six hundred or so people invited to attend the Grand European Gala of Bacala alla Vicentina, a four-course meal that was part of a bacala festival held always on the last weekend of September in the region. The European Union had just elevated *bacala vicentina* to the category of a "regional speciality," placing it in the blue-ribbon company of four other Italian traditional dishes like Pizza Margarita and Sicilian cannelloni, and a delegation from Norway—which exports more dried cod to Italy than any other country—had come to Vicenza to join the celebration. Dinner was served in a huge tent set up in the town square of nearby Sandrigo. There was codfish configured into antipasto tidbits like croquettes for hors d'oeuvres, and then a baccala soup "to prepare your stomach for the main course," explained Teofilo Folengo, a member of the Confraternite. Finally, the waiters produced the centerpiece offering: Sua Maesta il Bacala alla Vicentina con polenta di Mais Marano—bacala and polenta. It is creamy, rich, redolent of its oceanic origins, and particularly suited for pairing with a *vespaiolo*, a white wine from the surrounding green hills.

"Excellent," Folengo pronounced, "but my wife's recipe is still my favorite." When not performing his duties in the *bacala* fraternity, Folengo is a book illustrator. He quickly sketched out a side of dried cod on a napkin so I could see the original ingredient in its raw state. Every year, he explained, five or six members of the Confraternite visit each of the 36 restaurants in the area certified to serve the dish to make sure the *bacala* is authentic and up to snuff.

Alas, no *bacala* swam into view for dessert. When I asked Lina Tomedi, one of the first women to be inducted into the Confraternite, if such a thing as a *bacala* dessert even existed, she assured me it did. In fact, she said, she had not one, but two recipes for a *bacala* cake, and the next time I came to town she promised to bake one for me.

-Cathy Newman for Pop Omnivore