

Arctic Foodways and Contemporary Cuisine

HASTILY SCRAWLED ACROSS THE TOP of a dog-eared page in Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson's handwritten diary is a notation in tiny letters: "Nothing is more surprising than the complexity and customs of so called 'simple' people."¹ Penned in the early 1900s as Stefansson trekked across the Alaskan and Canadian Arctic, this note reveals his thoughts as he watched his Inupiat helper prepare blood soup. Stirring gently, she carefully poured seal blood into the broth, without allowing a hint of boiling. Though Stefansson failed to question why the soup demanded such careful tending, his companion knew that high temperatures would turn the blood into a curdled mess.

Stefansson had no intention of recording Arctic food practices. Yet he was one of the first explorers to credit Arctic native women with cooking knowledge, knowledge that dictated specific rules for creating properly prepared dishes. Some of these dishes, briefly described in early explorers' diaries over the last four hundred years, are traditional favorites, while others slipped out of favor after World War II. But, surprisingly, all of them, in one fashion or another, bear some resemblance to both classic and contemporary Western and Asian dishes. Traditional Arctic preparations can, in fact, be compared to the cutting-edge dishes served at trendy restaurants today.

Gathering Data

The research presented here was shaped by many sources. Arctic archives in the United States and England document the earliest contacts between Europeans and Canadian and Alaskan natives. I gleaned bits and pieces of history and information about food from old books written by explorers, whaling ship captains, and missionaries. Nutritionist Christine Heller's handwritten notebooks from 1947 represent the first attempt to organize indigenous Arctic foods in any logical way, and the detailed notes on food preparation compiled by Anore Jones likewise proved invaluable.²

Most of the information here came, however, from working with aging Inupiat elders, the keepers of the Arctic's dying food culture. Over the past thirteen years I have traveled to the Arctic, beyond the road system's reach, to help relatives and friends gather and preserve indigenous foods during summer fishcamp. Each July we work with seal, flensing, and rendering oil. During August we seine for fish until exhausted and then gut, clean, and hang the fillets to dry. At night, around a tiny table, we eat traditional dishes: boiled fish heads, willow leaves dressed in seal oil, and freshly pickled fish, all finished off with white crackers and jam from Outside (beyond the Arctic and outside Alaska). After supper the women talk food. They tell ancient stories, the age-old method of passing Inupiat culture from generation to generation, until long after midnight, the sun so bright no one wants to sleep.

Eventually, the elders helped me understand that a systematic set of cooking methods underlies Arctic cuisine and that there is a unifying theme: whether dishes are boiled, roasted, fermented, stewed, or *quaqqed*,³ they titillate the senses by means of skillfully employed contrasts. Soft textures play against coarse; hot temperatures, against cold. Pungent condiments offset bland tastes. Biting into icy meat creates heady sounds not unlike fireworks. And eating with the fingers and an *ulu* (a woman's knife) or a man's sharp knife completes the connections between the diner and dinner. Meals, which are rarely eaten alone, are both stimulating to the senses and continually entertaining.

Outside Alaska trend-setting chefs seek to entertain their customers by devising dishes that encourage interaction. On close examination it becomes clear that, despite their global larder, these chefs frequently design dishes with the same ingredients, or types of ingredients, used by Inupiat women. Surprisingly, analogous cooking techniques appear, as do similar cooking formulas.

Understanding Arctic Cuisine

The oldest, most stable cuisine in North America is found above the Arctic Circle in Alaska. Long overlooked and pitifully misunderstood, the cuisine's roots lie buried in Eastern Asia, whence Inupiat and Yupik ancestors ventured to Siberia, across Beringia, and on to Alaska during the last ice age, fifty thousand to fifteen thousand years ago.⁴ Since that time, according to J. Louis Giddings, ancient Arctic Inupiat culture along the Bering Strait and the Chukchi Sea survived a series of cultural changes, or ages, prior to 6000 B.C. before stabilizing five thousand years ago. The remoteness of the Inupiat and Yupik cultures accounts for their rich and intact food history. In fact, until 1778, when Captain James Cook sailed his ship, the *Resolution*, north through the Bering Strait, no outsiders had ventured into Alaska.⁵ Cook was the first European to see Arctic Inupiat. And until 1848, when New England whalers invaded Arctic waters and introduced guns, the past fifty centuries had seen only relatively minor variations in tools.⁶

Giddings formulated his hypothesis about the Arctic's stable culture after discovering hunting tools and domestic utensils buried under beach ridges at Cape Krusenstern, one of the oldest continuously inhabited areas in the Arctic. These artifacts resembled tools used in remote Arctic villages until World War II. Carbon dating traced the buried implements back to 1800 B.C., thereby indicating that few cultural changes took place over the intervening centuries. Giddings believes that social customs and belief systems also remained fairly intact.⁷ Since cooking implements have changed little, at least over the past four thousand years, we can postulate that many traditional dishes prepared today are the children of centuries-old mothers.

Ethnologists have long known that the greater the distance between villages and transportation routes, the more traditional the culture and its cuisine.⁸ Even today, narrow dirt roads weave through tiny communities along the Arctic coast and remote villages in the bush, but none lead out of town. During the 1930s in the tiny native village of Shungnak, Alaska—my birth home, located 30 miles above the Arctic Circle and 150 miles inland from Kotzebue Sound—short-wave radio was our sole aural connection to the outside world. Transportation to neighboring villages was by dogsled, skin boat, or a small wooden boat called a “white man's boat.” An occasional bush plane, with a pilot crazy enough to land in gusty winds on the river or on a bumpy stretch of ice when temperatures hovered below 0°F (-18°C), introduced us to the first leg of a trip to a hospital more than four hundred miles away, or to the six-week boat jour-

ney required to reach the lower forty-eight states. Today, the largest villages boast a paved runway for planes hauling government cargo, but at the edge of small villages, only a ribbon's width of dirt awaits planes barely large enough to carry twelve passengers.

Isolation was only one factor that sustained an unchanging Arctic culture. The spirit world also shrouded the Arctic with fear. Endless taboos and rituals relating to sex and pregnancy and birthing, to child rearing, hunting, and sewing, and to food preparation and eating habits were established in an attempt to control the spirits. Keeping them happy meant staving off starvation, thwarting famines that could nearly wipe out a village. To establish some semblance of power, Arctic peoples attributed souls to all living beings, who participated in a never-ending cycle of reincarnation. Enticing an animal, whether a whale, a caribou, or a fish, to offer its life required pleasing the individual animal's soul along with all the souls of the same species. If the animal was content with the events surrounding its death and its afterlife, the Arctic peoples believed that it would willingly give its life to sustain native life, thereby continuing the endless drama of reincarnation.⁹

Although men did the killing, women glorified the dead mammal's soul through caring rituals and creative endeavors. They reverently poured cups of water into the freshly killed animal's mouth to aid the transition from a life at sea to one on land. Their sewing skills paid homage to the mammal's soul by transforming its skin into beautiful, intricately designed clothing. And by carefully preserving body parts in a clean underground storage cellar, then turning the remains into properly cooked dishes without any waste, they fed the animal's soul as well as the hunter's hungry family.¹⁰

Cooking Similarities

At first glance, any connection between Arctic subsistence cuisine and modern culinary creations seems absurdly remote. In our society, where food writers earn a living reporting on the latest scientifically inspired dishes, no one wants to admit the possibility that these dishes might be akin to prehistoric offerings. But by reducing dishes to their essentials and viewing them in generic terms, surprising similarities between old and new emerge. Substituting fats—whether butter or seal oil—for specific ingredients and comparing *how* dishes were made, not *what* was made, helps us to categorize dishes by cooking methods. This approach reveals that today's cutting-edge cuisine frequently employs the same basic cooking methods that have been known since ancient times, albeit with different ingredients.



Boning and Preserving: Pokes, Galantines, and Confit

That divergent cultures should utilize similar cooking techniques in two vastly different climatic zones presents particular interest. For instance, the intricate boning-out technique used to remove an animal's bones while keeping the skin intact is a necessity above the Arctic Circle; in France it is an art form.

Seal pokes—boned-out seal skins free of meat and, especially, of holes—were first described in 1576 by Martin Frobisher, who discovered Baffin Bay's Inuit, the original inhabitants of Canada. Frobisher noted pokes attached to the sides of skin boats that acted as floats on rough seas or as drags when tied to lines trailing a harpooned walrus or whale.¹¹ No one knows when the boning technique was perfected, but if Giddings's timeline is correct, Yupik and Inupiat women along the Bering Strait were creating boned-out seal skin vessels some four thousand years ago.

In addition to their use as hunting equipment, seal pokes served as sturdy storage containers, and they still do. Women bone out a seal, keeping the skin intact and making certain that no accidental nicks or pricks remain. Once the carcass, feet, and flipper bones have been extracted through the anus or the mouth, the women sew the openings shut, leaving the incised mouth free. This bag-like skin is stuffed

Above: Drying seal intestines, fifty-pound breasts (background), and ribs (left background). Some parts will fill pokes; others will appear at the same meal served many different ways.

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with dried meats, blubber, and wild plants. Then seal oil is forced into every possible air pocket, which native women long ago understood were sources of spoilage. After strapping the muzzle shut, the poke is stashed in an underground permafrost cold cellar to freeze.

This boning technique matches one that was used in France to create an elegantly decorated galantine: poultry that has been boned, stuffed with forcemeat (ground veal, ham, and/or poultry), and then cooked, pressed, and coated with aspic for presentation at royal banquets.¹² Galantines are typically made by cutting the bird's skin from neck to tail for ease of stuffing, a simpler boning technique than that of extracting a carcass through the mouth or anus. Stylish caterers in the United States popularized chicken galantines in the 1980s, while simple galantines, without an elaborate aspic coating, are still standard fare at Parisian *traiteurs*. Chefs today easily bone out a four-pound chicken and stuff it with layers of salami and cheese or ground chicken and veal laced with brandy. Inupiat women, who rarely grow taller than five feet, have a far more laborious task when they wrestle with a two-hundred-pound seal and an equal amount of filling.

Though boning an unwieldy seal is an impressive task, the poke's function is equally notable. The seal skin forms an airtight barrier against spoilage so that freshly cut blubber, which is rendered by sheer gravity, will not turn rancid as long as temperatures hover around 55°F. At the same time, the dried seal meat, submerged in a sea of its own rendered oil, remains food-safe. Once frozen, pokes have a long shelf life, sometimes lasting as long as twenty-five years without any deterioration in flavor.¹³ Across the globe in Europe, farm women have traditionally employed a similar preservation technique to make *confit*, meat or fowl cooked and stored in their own congealed fat and then hermetically sealed to last throughout the winter.

Stirred Dishes

No word exists in the Inupiaq language for mousse, and no expression denotes a soufflé. Without electricity, light and airy dishes are difficult to achieve, and until World War II most kitchens even in the modern world were equipped only with manual tools. Women needed a strong arm to produce billowy creations. Many of us can remember a grandmother beating egg whites into high mounds with a flat wire whisk or coaxing cold, unpasteurized cream into fluffy clouds. Yet even without grandmother's simple tools, Arctic cooks in their sparse, tiny workspaces produced similar creations.

The Arctic's most famous dish is *akutuq*, derived from the Inupiaq word meaning "to stir." It is humbly classified as a "stirred dish."¹⁴ White men dubbed the creation "Eskimo ice cream" for its appearance as much as for its taste. Whipping finely cut reindeer fat and seal oil into a delicate, fluffy white mass takes forty-five minutes of vigorous beating with cupped and splayed fingers. Sometimes a tiny bit of water is added along with the seal oil to lighten the mass. "Add seal oil first, then water, when working with solid fat," Esther, an Inupiat elder from the coastal town of Wales, Alaska, on the edge of Seward Peninsula, instructed me as she whipped up a batch. "Makes it light."¹⁵ *Akutuq* resembles a puff of shiny whipped cream. The addition of sweet mashed salmonberries tints it an elegant pink, making it look just like the popular smooth berry whips of the 1960s or a silky French berry mousse. When chilled, *akutuq*'s texture is the same as that of a rich cold soufflé. Freezing *akutuq* produces a texture nearly identical to ice cream, though *akutuq* is smoother. Technically, *akutuq* and modern ice cream are similar, as both contain large quantities of fat. The fat in *akutuq* comes from reindeer and seal, however, while our familiar ice cream uses fats from dairy cows

Below: Adding wild blueberries and salmon berries to *akutuq* after it has been whipped with the fingers for forty-five minutes. Leftovers are frozen and eaten like ice cream.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZONA SPRAY STARKS © 1999



(cream) and chickens (eggs). Both dishes are stirred, or whipped, to incorporate air to expand the mixture. The fact that *akutuq* requires heat from a warm beating by hand to soften hard fat while modern ice cream needs ice to chill liquid fat is not a significant difference, as both creams are eaten in a frozen state.

Inupiat women also prepare an unsweetened stirred dish, a variation of *akutuq*, designed to meet the high-energy requirements of their husbands during long hunting trips. Instead of adding sweet berries to the fat, the women substitute dried seal meat, which they cook, squeeze dry, and shred before patting the mixture into neat blocks that look remarkably like a French country *pâté*. They also substitute dried fish and/or wild game, depending upon availability. Cooked acidic sourdock (*Rumex arcticus*) or willow (*Salix pulchra*) leaves are frequently mixed in to cut the fat. It is interesting to compare this ancient Arctic dish with *pâté*. The fat-to-meat ratios in both dishes are almost identical. And the Arctic's fat-cutting addition of acidic greens predates by many century's the classic French *pâté* accompaniment of sour cornichons and grainy Moutarde de Meaux.

Additional insights emerge when *akutuq's* composition is reduced to ratios, the traditional native measuring system and the professional system used by chefs throughout the Western world. *Akutuq* consists of 1 part hard fat (caribou or reindeer tallow), 1 part liquid fat (seal oil), and 2 to 4 parts flavoring (berries or shredded dried or cooked meat). Classic French formulas for forcemeats and mousses, including the sweet chocolate ones found in Escoffier's *Ma Cuisine*, reveal comparable proportions.

Sauces

Sauces or condiments are a part of every cuisine. I didn't understand the elusive connection between Arctic and Western-style sauces until I dined at an upscale restaurant in Anchorage, where I admired a lovely presentation of Alaskan halibut. The fish was nestled in a reduction sauce of wine, fumet, and cream scented with basil. Reduction sauces are liquids that have been cooked down to almost nothing, intensifying the taste and increasing the sauce's body. Just before serving, butter is often stirred in to mellow the flavors and provide a silky feeling in the mouth, a sensation frequently called *mouthfeel*.

Arctic reduction sauces, though far less refined, simmered slowly over seal-oil lamps in sod houses for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years. Interestingly, these sauces functioned exactly like today's reductions—to enhance flavors and impart that silky mouthfeel. Until only a decade ago,

during January and February Inupiat women along Alaska's northern coast regularly prepared a popular reduction sauce called "tomcod livers." Tomcod (*Eleginus gracilis*)¹⁶ runs were huge, so even though the fish livers are tiny, they were plentiful, and of course nothing went to waste in the Arctic kitchen. Sixty years ago the tomcod runs were so prolific that Esther, on the shores of Arctic Wales, could hook a tomcod as soon as she dropped her line into the frigid water through a hole in the ice. She and her sister, Polly, would gut the oily little fish, string them together, and hang them up to dry. The livers went into a pot with just enough water to cover. As the water simmered over a seal-oil lamp, the girls stirred gently, waiting for a smooth paste to form. When the tomcod oil rose to the surface, Esther skimmed it away.

"Some cooks keep it," she said, "stir it back in to thin [the sauce] out." But Esther's family, for as long as anyone could remember, preferred a mild flavor. So after the cooking was complete, instead of tomcod oil, she added seal oil to mellow the sauce's flavor and create a silky texture—not unlike that knob of butter whisked into the halibut reduction I tasted. Even though Inupiat and Yupik women reduce their sauces until thick, making them more like dipping sauces than the creamy pouring sauces of the West, the reduction technique is virtually the same. Walrus liver broth, another ancient reduction sauce from the Alaskan coast, goes a sensory step further than tomcod livers. Once reduced, the broth is set aside for ten days to ferment, which yields a fizzy, tingly sensation in the mouth. Sensuous and exciting, pickled walrus liver broth breaks the monotony of eating the same thinly sliced meat that might be served for sixty days in a row.¹⁷

Texture and Taste

Once basic hunger disappears, it is taste that guides the cook. Texture is also important, however. Taste and texture are, in fact, inextricably linked; if one changes, so does the other.

Like other peoples from around the globe, Inupiat love soft-textured foods. As soon as women devised cooking containers to withstand heat, they tossed fish heads into water and simmered them gently for an hour and a half, until the fish noses turned as soft as butter. Centuries later, in our own time and across the globe, Chef Fergus Henderson of London's St. John restaurant created a stir by audaciously serving similarly textured fare: pig's nozzle, simmered until soft, and with a texture "neither fat nor meat."¹⁸

Ferran Adrià, the Spanish chef who turned dining into a sensory happening rather than simply an occasion for gustatory delight, created an equally comforting texture with

thin, opaque sheets of various stocks thickened with agar. Resembling linguini when cut into narrow strips, the gelatin “pasta” melted in the first few bites from the heat of the mouth, simultaneously transforming the texture and flavor. Adrià’s gelatin-based black squid ink sheet also afforded visual surprise when placed in a shallow white bowl with hot soup ladled over the top. Before the first spoonful reached the diner’s mouth, the thin black square had practically dissolved.¹⁹ Adrià’s antics departed from classical French cooking, in which aspics were kept iced until eaten so that they wouldn’t turn into liquid pools. But Arctic cooks had been playing with similar textures for centuries: Marrow from caribou bones offers the same melting sensation, especially from bones close to the hoof. Sucking tiny anklebones extracts jelly so soft and smooth that it immediately oozes over a warm tongue.²⁰

Not everyone agrees that marrow is sensuous. Waverly Root, for one, defined the buttery substance as “mucilaginous matter which fills bones and is considered a particular delicacy by cannibals.”²¹ But like the Inupiat, Chef Henderson at St. John celebrates meltingly rich bone marrow, which he serves roasted and slathered on crisp toast.²²

Fish eggs were another Inupiat textural treat, their taut skins hiding a sticky yet creamy interior, waiting to explode with each bite. During summer fishing season, large, juicy salmon eggs were a staple along the Arctic coast and up the major rivers. To hush fussy babies, mothers gave salmon eggs a quick pass through boiling water and smeared them onto the baby’s fingers, to which they stuck like glue. Now and then an egg found its way into a tiny mouth with a surprising “pop” — early training for dining on herring eggs.

I can’t recall whether Josephine, my Inupiat babysitter, trained my palate with warm salmon eggs. But I do remember that, once I was old enough to pick berries, Josephine and her family took me every summer on a weeklong boat trip down the Kobuk River to the coast, where huge herring schools made their runs south. The fish laid thousands of eggs amid seaweed at Kotzebue Sound, just north of the Arctic Circle. We plucked herring eggs, seaweed and all, from the rocky beach. In the tent at night, Josephine swished the eggs, still attached to the seaweed, through hot seal oil. They were addictive — silky smooth from the seal oil, followed by a series of little explosions.

The current vogue for highlighting taste and texture by serving a single foodstuff prepared three or four different ways surely originated thousands of years ago. After all, almost all Arctic foods were eaten in various guises throughout the same meal, which often consisted of five courses. For instance, at sealing time the animal appeared boiled in

soup; served raw, thinly sliced and sauced or dipped in hot seal oil; dried and shredded and mixed with hard fat; jerked (sliced paper thin and dried) and served with willow leaves in seal oil; or fermented, with a pungent, cheesy flavor. In winter thinly sliced raw-frozen seal was served at every meal.

Even the now-ubiquitous frothy foamed dishes, “discovered” by Ferran Adrià, resemble the textures of some Arctic stirred dishes. Following Adrià’s lead, chefs the world over create flavored formulas with a little cream or gelatin for body and then pour each formula into a pressurized container and shoot it out onto a plate. Usually presented as an airy sauce to complement a soft-textured dish, foams collapse into little more than a mouthful of air. The latest foams are quick-frozen with liquid nitrogen and melt instantly in the mouth. The freezing enhances the texture even as it fools the eye and the mouth.

For centuries, however, women in Shungnak, Alaska, have achieved similar foams by beating a mixture of fish eggs and seal oil (a stirred dish with as many names as there are fish) with splayed fingers. The best eggs come from runs in early spring, when eggs are so rich in fat they that they need only a tiny handful of seal oil to double in volume. When finished, the mixture is as white as snow. *Kinuluk*, a main dish, is made by adding tiny bits of meat or fish to whipped fish eggs and coloring it with mashed acidic cranberries to cut the fat. Without the meat or fish flesh, the fish eggs and mushy cranberries whip up into a dessert called *ittukpalak*. Like modern foams, Inupiat foams are last-minute dishes, which risk turning into a puddle if not immediately consumed. Once fishing season has ended and the fresh egg supply runs out, the women whip up a foamy pink cloud of a dish from seal oil and blood called *kapuktuk*, or “blood fluff” by white people.²³ Further east along Canada’s northern shores, Inuit women change the mix to create a frothy dish with a sensuous, oily mouthfeel by beating rendered narwhal fat and walrus brain into the lightest *sabayon*-like consistency.²⁴

Historically considered food for savages, raw meat has long been a coveted texture throughout the world. Now trendy as *carpaccio*, thinly sliced raw meat is soft and easy to chew. So is steak tartare — finely chopped raw beef. Slices of raw fish turn up in one-bite sushi parcels or as sashimi. Raw meat is no stranger to the Arctic. The very word *Eskimo*, an Algonquian word coined by the Canadian Abenaki Indian tribe, means “raw-meat eaters.”²⁵ For Alaskan natives, however, unlike for Canada’s Inuit, raw meat was never simply served plain. When Inupiat women serve thinly sliced raw meat or fish, diners dip the slices in hot seal oil, creating a dish similar to China’s chrysanthemum pot or Switzerland’s

beef fondue. Not only does the oil add warmth and flavor, it gives raw meat a deeper taste and a different texture.

Presentation

Cooks have long known that diners eat first with their eyes. But chefs often strive to fool the eye by producing an element of surprise. Ravioli, for instance, is made with paper-thin slices of vegetables or fruits instead of pasta, or chemicals are injected into squid ink to break it into thousands of little nodules that create the appearance of caviar. Foams reach the diner as liquids on a plate but within seconds balloon like a billowing thundercloud. Misty vapors rise into the air when a hollow chocolate ball shatters into shards. Sometimes, a familiar scent wafts from a sauce, working a mnemonic spell. But this smell is purely ethereal, since the corresponding ingredient is missing.²⁶

The Arctic has long had visual surprises. As recently as sixty years ago, the floor temperatures in Arctic sod houses regularly registered below freezing. Yet two feet above floor level, the temperature easily reached 75°F (24°C). As a child, seated on the raised fur-covered sleeping bench, I loved watching a cup of soup pass from person to person. The hot liquid formed a vapory haze when lowered close to the icy mat-covered ground. Other surprises were found in the thin sheets of raw seal or caribou meat wrapped in willow leaves and eaten in bundles held between the thumb and first finger. We eagerly watched the cook, sitting within arm's reach, whip ingredients into an airy puff, just as diners today watch the cooking performance at the pricey chef's table in restaurant kitchens. Witnessing the creation of an edible surprise is far more exciting than having that surprise presented at the dining table.

As for aromas, the smells in one-room sod houses were big and heady and rarely appreciated by outsiders, who found them overwhelming. But for natives the smells signified both warmth and food. On the floor of the sleeping and eating area where women cured hides, dried blood and grease stained the mats, which turned rancid with time. Close by sat open pots of urine, necessary for extracting fat from skins and bleaching seal and caribou hides before they were made into clothing.

During the winter months, when temperatures rarely rose above 0° F (-18° C), everyone's sensual acuity diminished—except for the sense of taste. Sensitivity to taste sharpened as natives ate in semidarkness, living in partial hibernation during the sixty-seven days of winter without sun. For weeks seal-oil lamps suffused a soft glow within every dome-shaped house. There was no need to enhance

sensory appreciation through deprivation, as in today's European restaurants where blind waiters serve food in total darkness to heighten the other senses.²⁷

Temperatures

Like textures, flavors are also affected by alterations in temperature. When, in the 1990s, Ferran Adrià created a vial of pea soup with two different temperatures, he was considered revolutionary. His restaurant staff instructed diners to drink it down in one swallow. A pretty green color, the soup developed into three distinct temperature layers: cool, tepid, and hot, each layer delivering a different consistency and flavor.²⁸

In Alaska, out on the barren ice during long hunting trips, Inupiat women have for centuries simmered supper in pots to feed their cold, hungry husbands. As soon as the water boils, they spear a hunk of seal meat from the broth. The outside of the meat is thoroughly cooked and almost too hot to eat, but the small center remains like ice. In between these two temperature layers, the meat is warm and medium rare. Perfectly sliced, all three temperatures come together in a single exciting mouthful.²⁹

Quaq: Are We Ready for It?

One of the Arctic's greatest culinary achievements is *quaq*.³⁰ This is a sophisticated dish achieved by a simple technique that involves freezing and partially defrosting protein. The dish is virtually unrecorded, with no modern equivalent.³¹ Still a favorite today, few people outside of the Arctic culture know icy *quaq*. Ever since white men entered the native world more than four hundred years ago, women have shielded their traditional cooking from outsiders' unkind remarks. So *quaq* became a private family dish, shared only with trusted friends and rarely presented to nonnatives. Yet it is one of the most exciting and refined creations in Arctic cuisine—and also the most maligned. The early books popularizing stories of Arctic people chewing on raw meat were surely describing a meal of *quaq*. But *quaq* is not raw. It is raw-frozen. The difference is crucial.

If the Arctic was a nation, *quaq* would be heralded as its national dish, for it pleases all the senses. Texture, temperature, taste, and sound build toward a climatic mouthful. The Inupiaq word *cacocktat*, meaning “food that cracks between the teeth like bone,” describes it well.³²

Freezing *quaq* is simple; timing the finished product, or defrosting, is the hard part. The raw-frozen dish is ready when it defrosts just enough to be neither rock hard nor soft. The consistency is perfect when thousands of tiny ice



Above: Today's trendy tomato foam, minus the basil sprouts, could pass for blood fluff. The shrimp carpaccio blanketing the dish resembles salmon quaq but lacks its sensory dimension.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BARCLAY DODGE © 2005

crystals hide in the partially thawed protein fibers. After a quick dunking in seal oil, each bite of the near-freezing razor-thin slices shoots explosions through the diner's head. As the frosty crystals melt, their flavors change, becoming more intense. Each cut of meat, each different muscle, reveals its own unique taste.³³

All proteins can be *quaq*ed, including various parts of fish, fowl, and sea and land animals. Baby Alaskan king crabs with their thin, soft shells are a coastal *quaq* delicacy. Elders contend that *quaq*ed salmon eggs are even better. And for natives lucky enough to have a caribou hunter in the family, sucking sweet icy marrow jelly from the beast's hooves and feeling it melt on the tongue is as good as it gets.

Not all *quaq* is quite so simple. When pickled, walrus liver *quaq* not only cracks between the teeth but also makes the mouth tingle and fizz at the same time. This dish was unknown in my village of Shungnak and seemed incomprehensible to me until Esther Bourdon, searching for the right words, explained it: "Cut out the liver right away, when walrus is killed. Cut away bile, all of it. Soak liver in water, the ocean's salt water; get rid of some blood, makes the taste

mild. Cut into pieces," Esther continued, spreading her fingers to show two inches wide, six inches long, and three inches high. "Put in a pot, cover with water, bring to the boil. Don't boil; simmer...five, ten minutes. It should be rare. Cool in water. Change water every day until no more blood goes into water. In five days, maybe six, liver gets a little sour. Drain it. Put in cold cellar to freeze. When ready to eat, cut thin slices, dip in seal oil." Smiling, with a far-off look, Esther added, "It's real good with walrus flipper."³⁴

No other dish in the Arctic is as exciting as *quaq*, and perhaps no dish in the world compares to it sensually. Brain freeze—that excruciating head pain suffered when gulping slushy frozen margaritas—doesn't even come close, though a wasabi overdose may be a runner-up. Flirting with the aftereffects of poorly prepared blowfish certainly elevates one's fear factor, but eating soft blowfish lacks the heady crunching and crashing sound that Inupiat call

cacokttat or the temperature and textural change that Arctic peoples love so much.

That *quaq* could have evolved in any other temperature zone prior to the nineteenth century is unlikely. Modern freezing was never an end in itself, never conceived as a technique to create a special dish, except in the case of ice creams and sorbets. Freezing was meant to preserve foods and to transport valuable proteins (and later other foods) to faraway places. Once the frozen product found its way into kitchens, cooks turned the defrosted ingredient into a favorite dish.

If chefs would take a lead from ancient Arctic knowledge, *quaq* might well be the next hot-selling dish. Its perfection relies upon the freshest product, quick-freezing, precise defrosting, and immediate service—the same sort of detailed attention that chefs give to all great dishes. And like today’s meals designed to entertain the diner, *quaq* elevates the senses. Though no precise recipe exists, duplicating *quaq* is surely within the capabilities of today’s modern equipment, with its computerized timing and exact temperatures.

So why not try a gutsy variation of an Inupiat favorite, *quaqqed* caviar? What diner could resist an offering of expensive beluga eggs, their colors ranging from silvery-gray to black, sensuously waiting to explode with each frosty bite? Bright red king salmon eggs could add a splash of color to the dish, while the white vapor rising up from an iced glass plate would enchant the eye. A thimble-sized portion of delicately flavored lemon oil might offer the same satisfying mouthfeel that seal oil gives *quaqqed* seal. Then again, one of those acidic foams tasting of sourdock or Arctic willow leaves might just do the trick. 🍷

NOTES

1. Gisli Pálsson, *Writing on Ice* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 76.
2. Anore Jones, *Plants That We Eat* (unpublished Alaska Fish and Game document, 1983). See also Capt. F.W. Beechy, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering’s Strait*, 2 vols. (London: Samuel Bentley, 1831); John Bockstoce, ed., *The Journal of Rochfort Maguire 1852–1854: Two Years at Point Barrow, Alaska, aboard HMS Plover in Search of Sir John Franklin*, 2 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1968); Capt. James Cook and Capt. James King, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean: For Making Discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1780*, vol. 1 (New York: Tiebout and O’Brien, 1796); Capt. W.E. Parry, *Journal of a Second Voyage for the Discovery of a Northwest Passage* (New York: E. Duyckinck, G. Long, Collins & Co., 1824).
3. *Quaq* is the raw-frozen flesh of sea or land animals, fish, or shellfish.
4. Steve Langdon, *The Native People of Alaska* (Anchorage, AK: Greatland Graphics, 1993). The Inupiat are natives of the Arctic Alaskan coast, while the Yupik reside on St. Lawrence Island and between southern Norton Sound and the Aleutian Islands.

5. *Ibid.*, 46, 331.
6. J. Louis Giddings, *Ancient Men of the Arctic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), xix.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. Wendell H. Oswalt, *Eskimos and Explorers* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, 1979).
9. Christianity was unknown at Norton Sound until the Russian occupation in 1818.
10. *Puiguitkaat: The 1978 Elder’s Conference*, Kisautaq-Leona Okakok, trans. (Barrow, AK: North Slope Borough, 1981), 53–55.
11. Thomas Symons, ed., *Meta Incognita: A Discourse of Discovery: Martin Frobisher’s Arctic Expeditions, 1576–1578*, 2 vols. (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 1:69.
12. Alan Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 328. There is disagreement as to when galantines in their modern form of pressed meat first appeared. John Ayto, in *The Glutton’s Glossary: A Dictionary of Food and Drink Terms* (London: Routledge, 1990), 117, believes that it dates to the early eighteenth century, but Prosper Montagné writes that this sort of poultry galantine is considerably earlier, as a *galantine* of fish appeared later, toward the end of the seventeenth century. See Prosper Montagné, *Larousse Gastronomique*, Charlotte Turgeon and Nina Froud, eds. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961), 439.
13. Interview with Brad Ham, Denver, CO, 28 February 2001.
14. Christine Heller, Ph.D., unpublished personal notebooks, 1 July 1948, UAA Consortium Library, Anchorage, AK.
15. Interview with Esther Bourdon, Nome, AK, 10 July 2002.
16. Although most scientific taxonomies consider the Pacific tomcod to be *Micogadus proximus* (Girard), *tomcod* is the name by which *Eleginus gracilis* is known along the Alaskan coast.
17. Interview with Esther Bourdon, Anchorage, AK, 7 September 2003.
18. Fergus Henderson, *The Whole Beast* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 30.
19. Interview with Barclay Dodge, chef/owner of Mogador Restaurant, Aspen, CO, 21 May 2005. Barclay worked with Ferran Adrià in 1997.
20. Vilhjalmur Stefansson, “The Stefansson-Anderson Arctic Expedition of the American Museum,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 14 vols. (New York: Published by Order of the Trustees, 1914), 1:61.
21. Waverly Root, *Food* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 245.
22. Henderson, *The Whole Beast*, 35.
23. Dorothea Leighton, MD, unpublished notes, University of Alaska Rasmuson Library, Fairbanks, AK, fol. 12, box 1 (1940).
24. Jean Malourie, *The Last Kings of Thule* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1982), 65.
25. Oswalt, *Eskimos and Explorers*, 22.
26. Interview with Barclay Dodge, 22 May 2005.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Interview with Joseph E. Senungetuk, Anchorage, AK, 10 July 2003.
30. Pronounced “koowak,” *kwak* is the English spelling. *Quaq* is the Inupiat spelling.
31. Zona Spray, “Alaska’s Vanishing Arctic Cuisine,” *Gastronomica* 2 (2002): no. 1, 39.
32. Diamond Jenness, *Dawn in Arctic Alaska* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1957), 44.
33. These personal dining experiences are supported by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Adventures in Diet* (Chicago: Institute of American Meat Packers, 1935), 6.
34. Interview with Esther Bourdon, 7 September 2003.

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