

## The Fish Sauce Affair

---

It was so cold that winter that we stood by the furnace and kissed. He said, “You taste like cigarettes and fish sauce.” And then, an octave lower, “I love it.”

The boy is now gone, along with the smoking habit.<sup>1</sup> But like so many things we obsess over because of their maddening potency, Vietnamese *nước mắm* remains the epitome of this affliction. For me at least. My name is Trang, and I’m addicted to fish sauce.<sup>2</sup> I confess. I will seek every vehicle to transport it to my mouth. I simmer down chicken carcasses for broth, but really, just to dip bits of flesh in fish sauce hit with slivers of chili and a twist of lime juice. I wilt garlicky pea shoots in garlic because the bright green bite picks up the richness of fish sauce perfectly. I put a few drops of this fermented liquid in my butternut squash soup for that extra, discernable depth. Capers aside, my *beurre noir* sauce is not complete without it.

I can’t claim this obsession as my own quirk though. Known as *nam pla* in Thailand, *patis* in the Philippines, *badec* in Laos, and *bagoong* in Indonesia, fish sauce is adored across Southeast Asia and resonates in histories of the world. Once it was a great favorite of the Romans. Apicius cited it over 2,000 years ago in his cookbook, calling it *garum* and *liquamen*, produced in salting factories and sold by *salsarii*. From the loftiest Roman foodie court to the lowliest peasant hovel, fish sauce held its place in nearly every home.<sup>3</sup> The most superior of this form was made using “the fresh spilled blood from the still-beating heart of a live mackerel.”<sup>4</sup> The Greeks prized fish sauce so much they used it in social negotiations of desire. In one case, a man refused to trade his stash for an evening with a famed courtesan.<sup>5</sup> The English dubbed their version *fishpickle*, and the original Worcestershire sauce claims to be the happy descendent of this.<sup>6</sup>

For the lily-livered, raw fish sauce can be a dense salt-punch to the face. It’s visceral and pungent, funky even. It assaults uninitiated senses. After all, we are talking about a pure concentrated liquid extracted from fresh fish (usually uneviscerated anchovies) steeped in layers of salt and fermented in huge wooden or ceramic vats for one to two years until the clear supernatant liquid oozes out. Microbial digestion of carbohydrates (sugars and starches) and salt ensure that the liquid remains pure. Once extracted, the liquid basks in the hot sun to mellow and develop flavor; the rest of the original concoction is fashioned into other edibles, namely fish paste.<sup>7</sup> Much like the processes of casketing wine or scotch to encourage depth and smoothness, the best fish sauce leads a life of leisure before it is filtered, bottled, and then sent off into the world.

Sensitive palates can pick up complex notes of sea salt and noses of caramel in the first pour. This transparent amber liquid is comparable—in mouth feel, unctuousness, and depth—to the first pour of a vintner’s blend, or the first press of the most verdant extra virgin olive oil. Trust me. It’s the difference between 2% and whole milk. This upper echelon of the fish sauce hierarchy is generally reserved for the closest of kin, gifted to esteemed patrons, or used to lube up influential officials to this very day. Subsequent pours lack the same tone, clarity and complexity, but are nonetheless delicious (and more economical for everyday cooking). The unadulterated sauce may be “dark” in flavor, but gussied up with a squeeze of lime, some sugar and garlic, and the liquor grows bright and festive. Most of us have typically encountered fish sauce in this peppery diluted form: as a dip for Vietnamese spring-rolls, or as a dressing in a bracing Thai papaya salad. Its uses, however, extend beyond the usual blendings and fixes.

At the risk of sounding like a dogmatic Vietnamese, I will state: it is not okay to use soy sauce in place of fish sauce! Soy sauce floods and overtakes other flavors, which is fine if you want that. Fish sauce, on the other hand, harmonizes ingredients and conducts symphonies. It is a little alchemy in the kitchen, whether you prefer your magic rustic or elegant, rowdy or refined. But to experience the full toasty nuttiness of this condiment, choose a first pour of superior quality (labeled *nước mắm nhĩ* on Vietnamese brands).<sup>8</sup> The difference is a few dollars, but worth it. Splash a few drops over some grilled fish, drizzle over a bed of baby watercress. Or, as I do, pour into a shallow dish and dip, dip, dip your fingers in. And if you can find someone who will kiss you afterwards, count that as your double bliss.

---

<sup>1</sup> I slayed him—in literature. I also waited for him to return from this death that I thought he deserved. See my poem “Two Acteons” in which “Artemis dressed in dignity and sanity/ Is gone / Black before the finality,” and true to myth, our hero is torn to shreds at the jaws of his own hounds. I have also resumed smoking since. I’ll not hear a word of it.

<sup>2</sup> It is a real disorder! Others have also cited this very serious genetic affliction. See Anhvu Buchanan’s *The Disordered* (San Francisco: Sunnyside: 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Harlan Walker, ed., *Fish: Food From the Waters (Proceedings From the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1997)* (Blackawton: Prospect Books, 1998), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Sally Granger, *Cooking Apicius: Roman Recipes for Today* (Blackawton: Prospect Books, 2006), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Outside comedy, references to fish-consumption are somewhat fewer in number, but often present even more direct and striking testimony to the Greek citizens’ obsessions. Demosthenes notes in disgust that when Philocrates betrayed his city to the Macedonians for the price of a bribe he spent his ill-gotten gains on whores and fish sauce. See James N. Davidson, *Courtesans & Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (New York: Harper, 1999), 87.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert I. Curtis, “In Defense of Garum,” *The Classical Journal* 78, no. 3 (Feb-March 1983): 232-240.

<sup>7</sup> Edward R. Farnworth, *Handbook of Fermented Functional Foods* (London: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis, 2003), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Real first-pour usually indicates “40N” or “50N” on the label—the higher level of nitrogen being the level of purity. A small 100ml bottle will cost you around \$4-7, a remarkable hike compared to the \$3-4 for a 400ml bottle of the common stuff. Completely worth it.