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10:20 AM / MARCH 18, 2013



Passover Gefilte Fish Recipe, Soviet Style, by Imperial Chef Vitaly Paley

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When we think of gefilte fish—if we think of it at all—it’s a jar of poached patties, suspended in goo. Maybe, if we’re lucky, a homemade version of the same. But the Yiddish word gefilte doesn’t mean chopped or poached or anything like that. It means filled, stuffed. And traditional gefilte fish actually took that mixture of fish, eggs, onions, and binder—the same as those patties—and stuffed it back into the whole fish. It’s like the grandeur of French High Court cuisine transplanted to the shtetl. And in a few select households—those with roots in Eastern Europe—there are a few holdouts keeping the old ways alive.

Vitaly Paley is best known as a James Beard Award-winning, Iron Chef-trouncing giant of Pacific Northwest cuisine, which he serves up at [Imperial](#), [Penny Diner](#), and his flagship [Paley’s Place](#). But he spent his childhood in Belarus, living on pickled herring and cherry wine, on pallets of beets and potatoes and onions to last through the winter. But this isn’t a story of concrete-gray Soviet-era deprivation. Paley grew up in a loving home, with doting grandparents and farm-fresh produce and brandy on the table. And despite having three generations crowded into a two-room apartment, every festival involved a table-groaning spread for several dozen guests. And one of those celebratory dishes—not only at Passover but at all holidays—was a show-stopping gefilte fish.

From pelmeni to piroshki, stuffed dishes are a common part of Russian cuisine. It’s the usual peasant trick—take simple ingredients, along with enough binder to stretch the protein over many mouths, turn it into a marvel.

While Paley stresses the nontraditional onion skins and beets used to give his gefilte fish broth an earthy sweetness and color, the most striking recipe detail is that his version of the famous Passover dish isn’t technically kosher for Passover. Instead of matzoh meal, it calls for bread. And there’s a reason for that. Under Communism, the Soviet Union was an officially atheist country (Paley describes anti-Semitism as “the national pastime”). Jewish dishes were called by their Russian names in public, their Yiddish names in private. Paley’s aunt would secretly bake matzoh at home, then bury it within a suitcase and secretly transport it to the house for Passover.

How to Make Vitaly Paley’s Gefilte Fish

1 OF 19



This hidden matzoh was deemed far too precious to soak and grind as mere binder, and so Paley's grandmother would use bread instead. Cooks can easily substitute a slightly lesser amount of matzoh meal in the bread's place. But for Paley, this unkosher recipe is a perfect reflection of his Jewish—and Russian—heritage.

When the dish comes together, the smell—when you simmer for hours until the fish gelatins breakdown and the onion infuses, there is indeed a smell—is something of a time machine.

It takes Paley back to his childhood. And yes, there was anti-Semitism, and empty shelves at the grocery store, and a hard year of isolation after they petitioned to leave for America. But there was also a warm and loving family, birthday parties that involved the whole block, cream skimmed off the top of the milk container as a treat for a beloved boy, drunken cherries snuck out of the liqueur fermenting on the back patio. And special occasions, with far too many people crammed into a small space, a table full of all sorts of celebratory dishes.

Like gefilte fish.

Paley Family Traditional Gefilte Fish

Makes 6-8 first course servings

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 cups pieces of soft bread (about 3 dinner rolls)

2 cups milk

1 whole pike, tilapia, sea bass, or whitefish (about 3 pounds), boned and butterflied (or scaled, gutted, and cut through the bone into 3 or 4 pieces)

2 medium yellow onions

2 tablespoons coarse salt, divided (plus additional for salting the fish skin)

1 tablespoon ground black pepper

2 eggs

4 slices cut from a beet

2-3 carrots, peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch coins on the diagonal

2 tablespoons black peppercorns

1 teaspoon sugar

3 bay leaves

Horseradish for serving

PREPARATION

Place the bread in a small bowl and cover with milk. Set aside.

While the bread is soaking, separate the fish from the skin. Run a thin, flexible knife under the flesh, leaving about a quarter inch to hold it together (and keep you from cutting through). You can take it off in several pieces, if that's easier.

Coarsely chop the fish fillets (or pieces, depending on how your butchery went), and place in a large bowl. Place the fish skin in a pan, skin side down, and salt very generously—you should see the salt. Flip over, and salt the skin. Let sit for a few minutes while you prepare the vegetables.

Cut the onions in half. Peel one of the halves, cut into a few chunks, and place it into the bowl with your fish. Take the remaining onions and cut them into half moons—skin and root and all—and set aside. Set a small pot of water to simmer.

Squeeze the soaked bread dry (it should have absorbed the milk by this point), and run the bread, fish pieces, and the peeled onion half through a meat grinder. Place back in the large bowl, and season with the tablespoon each of salt and pepper. Crack two eggs in the side of the bowl, break them up a bit, and then work them into the mixture with your fingers. You may need an additional egg—you're looking for a mixture that just holds its shape. Let sit for a minute, for the bread to soak up the liquid and let the mixture tighten.

Scoop out a small spoonful of the mixture into the simmering water. Let poach for a minute or two, making sure it holds together. Taste and adjust seasonings (the water will wash away a bit of the salt, so season accordingly).

Take out a pot that's just large enough for the fish—a small cooking container is key for concentrating the flavors, so now's the time to dig out that poacher that's been gathering dust since the wedding, or one of those strange little pots from the thrift store. Lay down two of the beet slices in the bottom, then half the carrots and onions. Rinse and blot dry the fish skin, then lay it on top of the aromatics, open, and fill the cavity with the stuffing mixture (make sure to lay the stuffing thicker towards the top of the fish, where you have more skin). Pull the fish skin over, gently tugging to close—it won't meet, but will be enough to provide it structure and cover.

Gently cover the stuffed fish with the remaining onions and carrots, laying the slices of beet on top. Pour water to cover the fish by about an inch, and season the water with the remaining tablespoon of salt, sugar, peppercorns, and bay leaves.

Cover and bring to a boil over a high heat, then remove the cover and reduce to a gentle simmer for 2-2 1/2 hours. Cover the fish with a piece of parchment paper (you can ladle a bit of the cooking liquid over the top to keep it down), and add more water if needed so that the fish remains submerged. You'll know the fish is done when the liquid is very flavorful, and a bit tacky to the touch.

Cool completely and serve with some of the cooked carrots, and ample horseradish.

Note: This recipe has not been tested by the Bon Appétit Test Kitchen.

[Deena Prichet](#) is a freelance print and radio journalist based in Portland, Oregon. Her stories on topics ranging from urban agriculture to gefilte fish have appeared on National Public Radio, The Splendid Table, Marketplace, Vegetarian Times, and more.

KEYWORDS: [Passover](#), [Recipes](#)