

The Razor Fish Years



Mr Renouf with Soda, razor-fishing at Belcroute Bay in 1962

During the war, when Jersey was occupied by the Germans, the islanders became experimental in their efforts to supplement their diet. Guided, it seems, by long-dormant instincts newly awoken, men hunted out all manner of edible leaves, roots, berries and fungi. Bizarre recipes were exchanged, and the localities of herbs, which till that time no one had given a thought to, became a matter of the strictest confidence.

Hunger taught us much about the less orthodox harvest of the countryside. But the sea was our greatest friend, and almost everyone became a fisherman of sorts. Fresh fish, such as gobies, or cabots, to give them their local name, were scorned no longer. Even limpets knew no peace. But my most personal war memory concerns razor fish. The years when I was three, four and five are to me the razor fish years.

Every Sunday, summer and winter, my father took me to St. Catherine's Bay, a wide windy expanse of sand on the south coast. Out of a length of fencing wire he had fashioned two slender rods, each about 2 ½ feet long, with a flattened barb at the business end. He had no use for amateurs who used salt to make the fish rise.

I think of those days and I am back on the puddly sand, clumsy with my rod, trying to emulate my father's performance. He was a genius at the game – in, out, in, out – flashed his rod, and every keyhole with a gurgle of reluctance yielded its strange occupant. Dad was famous in the parish for his skill, and usually a clutch of spectators accompanied his stooping progress over the sands. Very often I remember, groups of off-duty German soldiers gathered too, and would slap their thighs in amazement at his expertise. Sometimes one requested a turn, and awkwardly holding the rod, rammed it into the sand. Dad kept an impassive face at this display of Teutonic gaucherie, and taking the rod, straightened it and with finesse continued to extract the long shells – in, out, in, out – never a failure. The Germans watched a while and then strolled away, baffled by the mystery of it all – keyholes in the dead sand, miniature openings to a teeming life beneath.

When Dad had collected three hundred fish, he took time off to instruct me in the art. 'No, don't push the rod right in – let it fall in, gently now. Then give it a little twirl and out she comes.' But I nearly always failed. When I did succeed, my world ended for an instant in a blaze of bright stars, and I would tenderly place my single catch among the hundreds in the chip basket.

Strange days on the beach; in summer, soon laying down my obstinate rod, I used to paddle and flop in the sea while Dad worked, and in winter I hung about shivering. Blobs of wet sand stuck to my clothes. They were first time days, wonderful in the memory: the first time my threshing turned to swimming, the first time I noticed the movement of the clouds; and lurking forgotten somewhere in those long afternoons lies the first time I caught a razor fish. I knew nothing of the war. I knew in a way that the uniformed men who

watched my father were 'different' and that I should be polite but not friendly with them, and yet sometimes when one picked me up, tossed me in the air and smiling caught me and set me down neatly, it was hard not to scream with pleasure, as I did when uncles and family friends threw me about. I knew too that there was a certain man one mustn't point at or in any way draw attention to, though he looked so unlike any of us, with his broad cheek bones and slanted eyes. Perpetually cheerful, he often joined us on the beach, borrowing my rod in winter, and in summer, sun-bathing near the German officers. He was an escaped Russian prisoner of war. It all meant nothing to me.

The catching of razor fish was not the end of the story. Much still had to be done before they were ready to eat. The first operation took place on the beach. Dad and I took the fish to a great pool and rinsed them thoroughly. Then off we set home, a long trudge through the countryside, myself by this stage tired and grizzling, very bad company.

At home my mother took over. She knew that somewhere in her mind existed the perfect recipe for razor fish. Every week she prepared them a little differently, and was never quite satisfied. Not till long after the war, when the German soldiers were a memory, when one no longer heard the whine of hostile places and no longer hid crystal radios under stair treads, did she find success.

We still go razor fishing. Not from necessity now, but for pleasure. I am at last an expert, though still not so professional as my father. Now it is north country tourists, not German soldiers, who gather round to exclaim and to request a loan of the rod.

Razor Fish Soup, prepared according to the recipe which my mother took so many years to evolve, is a wonderfully appetising dish. No one would think of it as a hard time standby. But to me it is more than a balance of ingredients; in it is the flavour of a wide beach in war time, a memory of bare feet in summer sand puddles, fretful tears in winter, the expression on the face of an enemy soldier rebuffed by a four years old child, and above all the lost personality of that child, in whom awareness of the wonder of life awoke in those long ago days. These are the intangibles which may make a bowl of steaming soup more than a means of satisfying hunger.

Here is the recipe:

Jersey Razor Fish Soup

Ingredients

100 Razor Fish
1 Cabbage – a Savoy or one with a firm white heart
1 lb. Onions
Milk
Salt and Pepper to taste.
½ teaspoon Golden Syrup.
Chopped Parsley and Marigold Petals, if possible, to garnish.
Level teaspoon cornflour.

Method

Cover razor fish with cold water and rinse to get away all traces of sand. It is a good idea to do a first rinsing in sea water before bringing home the fish. If the fish are rinsed at home place them in another clean vessel and again cover with cold water and rinse. It is necessary to rinse three times before all trace of sand is gone.

Finally, place fish in a clean vessel and cover with boiling water to separate them from the shells. Chop fish and place in saucepan, cover with cold water, bring slowly to the boil and stew for about an hour.

Remove from heat and if possible leave all night. In the morning remove the fish from liquid, squeezing to obtain all the juice possible. Strain through a muslin bag or something similar when stock will be ready.

Shred onions and cabbage finely using only the heart of the cabbage. Cook until tender after adding seasoning to taste. Just before it is cooked, add the half teaspoon of syrup.

Before serving, add the same quantity of milk as you have stock. Mix a level teaspoon of cornflour with enough milk to form a smooth paste and stir into the liquid when it has been brought to the boil again.

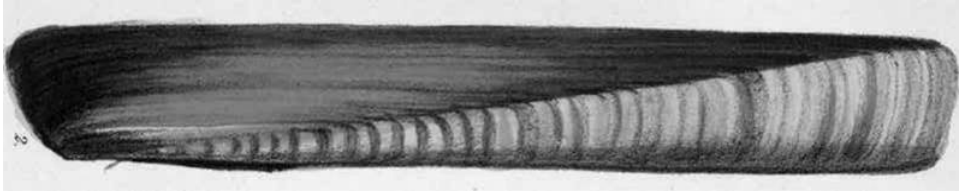
Now, bring it very carefully to the boil being careful not to stew at this stage. Add the cornflour paste and stir until the slight thickening occurs.

Serve in bowls and add a little chopped parsley and marigold petals on top.

Sufficient for 8 large portions.

Note

The Razor Fish (*Ensis siliqua*) is a long narrow marine bivalve, four or five inches long when mature. It is found below high water levels on sandy beaches where it may be detected by the presence of its breathing holes. These take the form of small apertures in the sand, shaped like a miniature keyhole.



During the war Laura lived with her family at their shop, Poplar Stores in Maufant. After the Occupation they moved to Maison Petit Port, La Moye, St. Brelade.