

Lutefisk Wars!

Music from Zenith City by Woodblind

Marie: You're listening to The Fish Dish, brought to you by Eat Wisconsin Fish, a campaign of the Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. Are you fish-curious? Or are you a fish expert who wants to learn even more about Wisconsin's fisheries and cooking fish? We'll give you the latest "dish" on fish.

Your hosts are . . .

Sharon: Sharon Moen

Marie: and Marie Zhuikov

Together: Two friends who have been working for Sea Grant seemingly forever and who know a thing or two about fish.

Marie: But that's "forever" in a good way.

Sharon: Sharon runs the Eat Wisconsin Fish campaign

Marie: and Marie is a science communicator.

Marie: This episode is about Lutefisk Wars. Sharon and I discovered there are different camps that can get a little feisty when it comes to cooking this traditional holiday fish. Wisconsinites of Swedish and Norwegian descent feel strongly about their favorite preparation methods. We were invited into the home of Mary Childs in Port Wing, Wisconsin, to talk about lutefisk cooking options, along with Mary's friend Marge Ogren. We'll also be discussing other holiday fish dishes.

In the second, "Fish-o-Licious" part of the show, we'll actually eat a lutefisk lunch with Mary and Marge. (Pregnant pause.) You'll want to stick around for that!

Now, according to Smithsonian magazine, legend has it that Viking fishermen hung their cod to dry on wooden racks made from birch trees. When some neighboring Vikings attacked, they burned the racks of fish, but a rainstorm blew in from the North Sea, dousing the fire. The remaining fish soaked in a puddle of rainwater and birch ash for months before some hungry Vikings discovered the cod, reconstituted it, and had a feast.

Thus, lutefisk was born! Of course, now it's not prepared that way, but it is close to it. Sharon, tell us the scoop.

Sharon: "Lutefisk Wars" might be a bit of an overstatement but it does seem that people who love lutefisk have a definite way they want it prepared. Some bake it, some boil it, some even eat it uncooked.

Lutefisk is dried cod that has been pickled in lye and then reconstituted in fresh water for several days. During December in Wisconsin and Minnesota you can find lutefisk in many local grocery stores. It's even on the menu in some restaurants and at community church dinners. If you see it at the grocery store, it's generally a semi-opaque fillet in the fish section. The color reminds me of a white moonstone.

Marie: We tried to find a community lutefisk dinner that we could attend but failed.

Sharon: Because of the COVID pandemic, most church dinners were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. Not to be thwarted, I made a few phone calls and talked Mary into meeting with us. We headed to Port Wing, Wisconsin, a modest town of about 200 on the shores of Lake Superior.

Marie: When we met with Mary and Marge, Mary wanted to set the record straight right away.

Mary: I would like to start off by making it clear I am not the lutefisk maven of Port Wing. That's why I brought Marge along. I'm here because you saw my name on a website.

Sharon: Right. It seemed like you were the one who was organizing the lutefisk dinners for the church.

Mary: I was part of a committee and I was also the one who knew we weren't doing the dinner this winter.

Marie: There are two different ways of preparing the lutefisk.

Sharon: Two camps here.

Marie: And we're interested in hearing about that.

Mary: Well, the traditional way, and Marge can say more about that.

Marge: Well, I just know the way Bucky does it. He makes bags out of cheesecloth. And then he puts a certain amount of fish in there and then puts the whole bag into the boiling water so that it doesn't all fall apart so then when it's done you can pull the whole bag out and put it into a bowl.

Marie: Who is Bucky?

Marge: Bucky Jardine.

Mary: He's Ken Jardine. He was the county supervisor for this area. He's now 88, I think. But if we were doing the dinner, he would still be doing the lutefisk.

Marge: A little bit, anyway. He's 89.

Marie: Is that how you do yours, too?

Marge: No, I never have made the bags. I just put it in the boiling water. Or I've done it in the microwave, too. That works fairly well. It's not hard to cook.

Mary: There are 3 men in town . . . they would spend the week before the lutefisk dinner, soaking the lutefisk that they get. Wherever they got it. I don't know. (Janet Johnson got it from the store). They would soak it and change the water like twice a day, for a week! The tradition is that the cod would get dried and then lye put on it. Then they had to soak it in water to get rid of the lye. That's where the term lutefisk comes from. It comes from the word for lye. I just read that the other day as I was looking it up. So, it was a week-long process before the dinner just to get the fish ready.

Sharon: So was it you who was telling me on the phone that your dad used to walk around with piles of .

. .

Mary: My dad remembers – my dad was born in 1913. He remembers older men in his family coming home with an armload of dried fish that would be soaked to become the lutefisk. Like cords of wood. That was his memory.

My mother did it in the oven. She'd put it in a dish like that Pyrex over there and put it in the oven with a little water underneath it, maybe a little salt on the top and put foil over it and put it in the oven for a half hour so it kind of poaches, until it gets flaky. You know it's done when it gets flaky. To me, that always made it hold together a little bit more. It didn't become so jelly-ish.

Marge: It can get to be jellyish.

Sharon: So, Marie, the first time you ate lutefisk – you're a good Minnesotan, right, by birth?

Marie: Yep.

Sharon: I'm a transplant, so, I didn't have lutefisk until later in my life. Tell me about the first time you ate lutefisk and what you thought of it.

Marie: Well, it was when I was working in northern Minnesota for the Forest Service, or, as we call it there, da Forestry, and my boss was Norwegian. During the holidays, he would bring lutefisk into the office for the uninitiated, which I was. At that point in my life I was probably in my late 20s. He prepared it – it was jelly. It was the jelly kind of lutefisk.

Sharon: It must have been boiled then?

Marie: Probably, yeah. But it had melted butter over it, and I think that made it quite palatable. I thought it was okay, back then.

Sharon: That's the first way I had it, too, and I was also in my late 20s. It was like fish jelly in butter and it did not impress me as something I would go out of my way to eat again. I felt like it was interesting being at Mary's place because she baked it and that's a whole different way of preparation. And they put a cream sauce on top of it. So, it tastes like a whole different beast. Of course, it's 20 years later, so maybe my taste buds have changed.

Marie: So yeah, you have the cream sauce camp of lutefisk eaters, the melted butter camp. The boilers versus the bakers. (Laughter)

Sharon: Yeah, it's interesting how this one dish has its fans in both courts and how they're like, 'No, you gotta bake it,' or, 'No, you have to boil it.'

Marie: Yeah, I was with some people who were having arguments about wild rice just the other day. You have the paddy rice versus the wild grown, the hand-harvested versus machine-harvested. People can lose friendships over wild rice arguments, and I think probably the same is true about lutefisk.

Sharon: Yes. When it comes to tradition and your family's tradition, especially. Yeah, people get entrenched in their ways. So, we talked to Mary and Marge a little bit more about their church's lutefisk dinner.

Sharon: How many people normally show up to your lutefisk dinners?

Mary: I'd say tops, 200.

Sharon: That's a lot!

Marge: You wouldn't think that many people would like it.

Mary: Ours is well-known. There's kind of a lutefisk dinner circuit in this Wisconsin, Minnesota, maybe even over to Michigan, area. People go around to all the dinners. And, of course, it's been said that ours is the best.

Marge: Of course. They probably tell that to everyone.

Sharon: How far away do people come?

Mary: Certainly, from Duluth. I know upper Michigan. I've been contacted by people in upper Michigan. We're talking 50-75 miles one way. The other things that they serve with it are boiled potatoes, of course, cream sauce. So, this is another distinction between the Swedes and the Norwegians. The Swedes do the cream sauce, which is like a bechamel sauce, a white sauce. Or melted butter. For the sake of our group here, they actually have melted butter, too. Marge, for the last several years, has made the cream sauce. I'm talkin' gallons!

(Laughter)

Mary: Another thing they serve at the dinner is something called rutmos. It's a combination of rutabagees and potatoes mashed together. And then Roald Larson makes 12 loaves of rye bread.

Marge: Good stuff.

Mary: There's also some herring involved. Pickled herring, ya. Lefse. You know about lefse.

Marie: Yeah.

Mary: For several years here people in the church MADE the lefse, which is a labor-intensive project. After a couple of years, they said, let's just buy it.

(Laughter)

Marie: Just so you know, lefse is like the Norwegian version of a tortilla. It's made from potatoes, flour, butter and milk. It's a traditional accompaniment to lutefisk. The fish is often rolled up in the lefse, in something jokingly referred to as a Norwegian taco. Now, back to the lutefisk...

Mary: At the dinner they pick it up with a serving spoon. Either it's the nice flaky kind or it's the more jelly kind. They ask people if they want more and people say more so it's like a spoonful or more of fish.

Marge: Yeah.

Sharon: And you're not talking a teaspoon-fulls.

Mary: More like a ladle. A serving spoon.

Marge: A piece of fish would have the skin on the bottom, usually, because we don't take that off.

Sharon: Uh-uh. Kind of like a 6-ounce serving, like a normal serving at a restaurant would be.

Marge: And then they might want more than one piece because it's so good.

(Sound of gas stove lighting.)

Mary: (From afar, at stove) – and then people come back for seconds.

Marge: They have the meatballs, too, don't they? You can have them with lutefisk or you can have just the meatballs. It's a different price.

Mary: It was a Christmas evening night dinner since as long as I can remember. Then we would open presents afterwards. Of course, we had to do all those sticky lutefisk dishes first!

Sharon: Was it the same in your family?

Marge: I know it was always Christmas eve. We'd go to my grandma's and she would be the one to fix the lutefisk. But we didn't open our presents until the next morning.

Sharon: Why do people eat lutefisk?

(Laughter)

Marge: Because it's a tradition, I guess.

Mary: A lot of people just like it. Marge loves it. I like it. I have it once a year and it just kinda connects me back to my culture a little bit. Even when it's flakey, I do like it.

Marge: Yeah. I like it. My sister likes it very well so usually, we try to get together and have a little lutefisk once or twice this time of year.

Marie: It's interesting to see how Marge's family did their lutefisk and Mary's family did it a little bit differently. Sharon, do you have any ancestral holiday foods?

Sharon: Yes. So, my favorite is fruitcake. I know people make fun of fruitcakes but that's because they haven't had my great grandmother's recipe for fruitcake. I start it just after Thanksgiving. It's pretty simple. It's just like a bunch of dried fruit with some batter to stick it together. You slow bake it. You wrap it in cheesecloth. I soak mine in brandy, cuz, hey, Wisconsin. (Laughter) But the real recipe calls for sherry, like a dry sherry. You just soak it then and let it sit for a month. It's a way of preserving food, too, much like lutefisk was. A lot of the Native Americans around our part of the world would smoke their fish so they would have food over winter. So, ways of preparing food without a refrigerator . . . so soaking things in alcohol is one of those ways to preserve it forever! (Laughter)

So, they found like this 145-year-old fruitcake.

Marie: No way!

Sharon: Yeah. I think I read that last year. I'll have to look that up again.

Marie: Oh, that's really scary.

Sharon: They were like, we shouldn't eat it, but they did a little.

(Laughter)

Marie: Wow.

Sharon: Some family in Michigan. It's like the grandma left a fruitcake in the attic for a thousand years.
(Laughter)

Marie: Oh no!

Sharon: What about you. When you think about holidays, things you just have to have a taste of this holiday season.

Marie: In my family, I'd say it's pickled herring. My dad was of German descent and he really liked pickled herring. The only time we would eat it would be during the holidays. So, I carry that tradition on in my family, much to my children's dismay, but you know, maybe one day it will TAKE. It will take and they'll carry it on.

Sharon: I agree, you never know what's going to creep into their palettes. So, Marie, you're in luck if you like pickled herring because some people around here make it themselves. In fact, when we were at Port Wing, we heard about some of their local pickled herring.

Mary: Yes. In fact, we have people in town that make their own pickled herring. From herring that's probably caught down here.

Sharon: At this point, I'm compelled to tell our listeners that herring from the Great Lakes is very different from ocean herring. Pretty much any species of fish can be pickled. But the pickled herring one might buy from grocery stores, that is actually ocean herring from the Atlantic Ocean. It's a different type of fish. So, the fish in Lake Superior looked so much like the ocean herring, when the Swedish people came over here and started plying the waters for fish and they would just pull up nets of these, now we call them ciscoes, and they were like they are just lake herring. Instead of the ocean herring, they're lake herring. That's how that name got started around here but it's actually a misnomer that confuses a lot of people.

Marge: Yeah, I always made my own pickled herring for years. The kind you buy is ocean herring. But you can make the Lake Superior herring taste pretty much like it if you get the right spices.

Marie: And so I know, with pickled herring you can get it in the cream sauce or the wine sauce. Do you have a preference?

Marge: Well, anytime I made it I just made it in the wine sauce. But if I wanted it in cream sauce, I just took some out and put it in the cream sauce! (Laughter.)

Marie: Right!

Sharon: Other cultures have preserved fish in different ways. I spent some time studying puffins over in Iceland and there, they just have these huge racks out on the rocks with fish drying. They like their fisker, which is dried fish that they sell in the stores, kind of like you would get beef jerky here. You could buy dried fish.

I also had a gefilte fish tasting party once, just to try gefilte fish because a lot of the Great Lakes fish that come in during this time of the year are sent to that Jewish specialty market for these gefilte fish that are served during holiday gatherings also. They use lake whitefish and cisco for that.

The reason there's so many fish coming in right now is because of the roe. And the roe is the valuable part of the cisco fishery. A lot of the roe goes to Scandinavia where they eat fish eggs like we would eat jam, spread it on crackers and bread.

Music from "Zenith City" by Woodblind

Marie: And now it's time for the Fish-o-Licious part of our podcast, where we discuss fish recipes which, by the way, you can find on the Eat Wisconsin Fish website (eatwisconsinfish.org) along with photos. Plus, The Fish Dish podcast webpage.

Now, one thing we need to mention about cooking lutefisk is that you need to cook it in glass or stainless steel. Otherwise, if it's in an aluminum pan, it will turn it black.

Marie: Are you cooking the lutefisk now?

Mary: It's in the oven.

Marie: How are you doing what we're going to have today?

Mary: It's in the Pyrex pan with a little water underneath it and foil at the top and it's in the oven for 35 minutes. I'm also boiling some potatoes and I'm going to make some cream sauce, or Marge is.

Marge: I didn't know we were going to have lutefisk today!

Sharon: Surprise!

Marie: It's part of the experience.

Sharon: Fun!

Mary: They also serve cranberries in various ways. What I have today is the Ocean Spray jelly cranberry sauce. Because a little bit of cranberries helps perk it up. The color brightens up the plate.

Sharon: It's true. Lutefisk comes out very pallid and potatoes can be pallid, and cream sauce is white, so we need a pop of the cranberry jelly.

Mary: So Marge, does this look done?

Marge: Yeah, it does look done.

Sharon: My first bite is yummy. It's fishy. It's not as flaky as whitefish or as some traditional fish in Wisconsin.

Marie: Don't forget the potatoes and the homemade rye bread and cranberry sauce.

Sharon: It's really a feast.

Sounds of eating.

Sharon: What do you say about it, Marie?

Marie: Well, I've heard it described as fish Jell-O before, but this is flakier.

Sharon: It's more solid.

Mary: Thank you, thank you!

Marge: It's very flaky. I think it's very good.

Marie: It's kinda crunchy, too. I wasn't expecting – when you cut through it, it kinda crunches, and I do not remember that happening when I was eating lutefisk in my past.

Sharon: Mary, how would you describe it?

Mary: It's all in your perspective. Yes, it is flaky and it has some solid texture, which I like, compared to the fish jelly. It's definitely a fish taste. If you haven't had it before how do people get used to it? I think you either just have to grow up with it or be super motivated because it's so different.

Mary: My mother always bought white pepper to put in the white sauce so it would all be white. And the other thing I remember the other day is when my parents first moved up here in 1980, and we were here for Christmas, we would go out to Orville and Helen Swanson's house to get the milk because it was fresh milk from the cow, so it had the cream at the top. It made the white sauce so much more rich.

Marge: Some people put nutmeg on it.

Mary: Oh, do they?

Sharon: Really! That's a fun twist. I confess, my favorite part is the bread that you made. (Laughter) I like the fish. It's fine fish. I would definitely eat this version of lutefisk again.

Marie: You definitely would?

Sharon: (With mouth full) Uh huh.

Mary: I think when you go through the line you can say, you know I'd like the flakier fish.

Marge: Or, I want that piece right there.

(Laughter)

Jingle Bells music

Marie: That's it for this episode of The Fish Dish. For more information and fish recipes, visit Eat Wisconsin Fish on the web at eatwisconsinfish.org, plus Twitter and Facebook. Thanks go to Mary Childs and Marge Ogren for inviting us for a little lunch. And thank you for listening!