

# Dining at the Lenten table

## Guest Column

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The first-time visitor to New Orleans' Mardi Gras receives quite a shock as the clock strikes midnight.

As a novice reveller once upon a time, I expected the festivities to last into the wee hours. But promptly at 12, street sweepers and mounted police form a line, moving along Bourbon St. and sending everyone indoors. The street party is over. It's now Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

In Catholic households around the world, the faithful honour God through abstinence that symbolizes Christ's fasting in the wilderness. Although the sweeping doctrine changes of 1965 eased strict dietary directives, many people eat traditional dishes for some or all of the 40 days of Lent.

My introduction to the practice was at Gumbo Shop, a restaurant in New Orleans' French Quarter, which serves a Lenten version of the popular Gumbo Z'herbes. It's a rich, thick stew named for the leafy green vegetables it contains. Two versions are made with meat or seafood. A third type is vegetarian. (Its comforting broth is also perfect for a stomach that took in a bit too much Fat Tuesday cheer, although I won't go into personal details about that.)

"Lent is a time of letting go of things we could have, but we sacrifice them as a discipline," says Suzanne Scorsone, director of communications for the Archdiocese of Toronto. "Then, when a real temptation comes along, there's a better chance we'll be able to do without that and do the right thing."

Scorsone, who will serve fish or pasta today, emphasizes that modern Catholicism is more concerned with over-all Lenten sacrifice, rather than specific dietary restrictions.

Although meat is optional for the rest of Lent, it is not permitted on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday. In New Orleans, I enjoyed my gumbo the way many natives do: a meat-filled z'herbes on Holy Thursday and a meatless version the next day on Good Friday.

Catholics around the world plan their Lenten meals around the foods of their culture. In Europe, many give up meat, oily fish and dairy products in favour of grains, beans, pasta and simple breads made without oil or sugar.

As a young woman in Bavaria, my mother-in-law marked Lent with pretzels.

Lent originally allowed only bread and water, and the pretzel's austere ingredients and Christian symbolism made it a perfect choice. Whether first made by early Christians forbidden their faith under Roman rule, as some believe, or by



AP FILE PHOTO/RICK BOWMER

Fish is a traditional staple in many Catholic households during Lent.

monks in the 7th century, the pretzel's shape symbolizes arms folded in prayer around the Holy Trinity. In Germany, pretzels were given to the poor. In Austria, they adorned palm branches on Palm Sunday. Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel included a pretzel in his 1559 work, *The Fight Between Carnival And Lent*.

Bread also plays a role in one of the most traditional Lenten dishes in Mexico, a dessert called Capirotada. As her mother did, my friend Carmen Asomoza, of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, will make it each Friday of Lent. It's an unusual bread pudding made of sweetened bread, nuts and mild cheese. "My mom also made Torrejas, with (bread) slices dipped in an egg batter, fried in butter and served with syrup and clotted cream," Asomoza says. "When I was a kid I always looked forward to Lent because I could have Capirotada and Torrejas."

Asomoza, who frequently cooks for her niece's catering firm, makes many of the traditional dishes associated with the season: Caldo De Pescado (fish soup), Nopalitos (cactus leaves), Tortitas De Camaron (shrimp patties with mole sauce) and lentils with vegetables or fruit.

"My mother would put a banana at each place setting and we would slice the banana into the lentils and eat. The rest of the year she would add chorizo."

On this day, the food at Catholic tables will vary considerably across the city.

"Toronto is one of the most ethnically diverse dioceses on the planet," Scorsone says. "Someone might be eating pickled herring, another rice and fish, someone else might be eating cornmeal with tomatoes. It's not a question of the food as such. It's a question of what we are doing with our lives."

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## Caldo De Pescado

✓ Star Tested

This Mexican fish soup is adapted from [www.bigsuperstore.com](http://www.bigsuperstore.com). Serrano peppers look like small, pointed jalapeños.

2 large cloves garlic

1 onion, quartered

2 tomatoes (about 1 lb/500 g), quartered

4 cups water

1 stalk celery, diced small

1 serrano pepper, seeded, chopped

1 bay leaf

1 tbsp fresh oregano leaves

1 to 1-1/2 tsp sea salt

1/2 to 3/4 lb (250 to 375 g) red snapper fillets, cut in 2-inch chunks

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

1/4 cup chopped fresh coriander

2 green onions, finely chopped

Sour cream to taste

**PREPARATION:** In food processor, mince garlic. Add onion; chop. Add tomatoes; blend until smooth.

Place tomato mixture in medium saucepan. Add water, celery, serrano, bay leaf, oregano and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to boil over medium-high heat, then reduce heat to low, cover and simmer 15 minutes.

Increase heat to medium-low. Add fish, cover and simmer 5 minutes. Add remaining salt if desired. Drizzle in oil.

Top each serving with coriander, green onions and a dollop of sour cream.

Makes 4 servings.

## Capirotada

✓ Star Tested

This Mexican bread pudding is adapted from [www.texascooking.com](http://www.texascooking.com). Queso fresco is soft, white, unripened cheese. Piloncillo is hard brown sugar with a

deep molasses flavour; to get chunky smash it with a mallet. Both are sold at Latin American grocery stores in Kensington Market and elsewhere. Toast pecans in a medium skillet over medium heat, shaking frequently.

1 lb (500 g) loaf stale white bread, cut in 1/4- to 1/2-inch cubes

1/2 cup butter

2 tbsp canola oil

1 cup water

2 cups piloncillo chunks

3- to 4-inch stick cinnamon

1 cup pecan halves, toasted, coarsely chopped

2/3 cup raisins (optional)

3 oz (80 g) queso fresco, crumbled (about 1/2 cup)

2 oz (60 g) monterey jack cheese shredded (about 1/2 cup)

1 tsp ground cinnamon

3 large eggs

4 cups (1 L) whole milk

2 tsp vanilla extract

**PREPARATION:** Put bread in large bowl

Melt together 1/4 cup butter and oil. Toss with bread. Spread bread on cookie sheet. Place under preheated broiler. Broil 3 minutes, stirring twice, until toasted.

In small saucepan, bring water, sugar and cinnamon stick to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium. Boil 5 minutes, until syrupy. Stir in remaining 1/4 cup butter until melted. Remove cinnamon stick.

Meanwhile, sprinkle pecans, raisins (if using) and cheese over bread. Stir to combine. Sprinkle with cinnamon. Transfer to buttered 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Pour syrup over top. Bake 30 minutes in preheated 350F oven.

In large bowl, beat eggs until thickened and pale yellow, 1 to 2 minutes. Gradually beat in milk and vanilla. Pour over bread. Bake 40 minutes. Serve warm.

Makes 12 servings.