

# HIGH TEA IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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IF anyone had told me before I first saw Newfoundland that I should come to connect it with unusual and exciting foods—and not with blubber or pemmican—it would have been a surprise. As everyone knows, this country is still under the cloud of her depression, with an appalling number of people living thinly on the dole. But even in hard times people who can eat will eat; and fortunately nature has arranged a variety of easily obtained articles of diet here that are palatable enough for an epicure to enjoy. Newfoundlanders do enjoy them.

Every corner of the world has some distinctive foods, little known outside of it, but whose flavor is the very essence of home to the exile. I doubt if any has, for its size, more items on its bill of fare that are peculiarly its own than this oldest colony of Britain.

Newfoundland is an engaging go-between land, combining the traits and customs of the Old Country and the New. So we eat often, like the English, but with more variety, like Canadians or Americans. We import our persimmons and pomegranates from New York, our butter from New Zealand and Nova Scotia, our custard powder from England. And because this country was first settled by West Countrymen, every woman in the remotest outport with a cow or a goat makes her own Devonshire, or "scalded," cream.

We have the pleasant custom of a mid-morning snack, called a "levener" because of the hour, or by any fisherman, a "mug-up". Afternoon tea is an institution, with an alarming variety of big cakes and little cakes. If it is a party, you may count ten or twelve kinds, all works of art. In a place where servants are generally kept, women take pride in being superb cooks. The evening meal is tea or dinner, according to the diner's taste or social status. Church suppers are advertised as "high teas" or "meat teas". Then no one can think of going to bed without another repast, which is his supper. Visitors have gone home and built up a legend about Newfoundland's lavish hospitality; but visitors, or tourists whisked in and out on the round trips by boat, get very little chance to try out the real specialties on the island's menu.

One must follow the calendar around to discover them. They begin in the spring, when the trout streams wake up. No locality

of course has a monopoly of trout; but anyone who has ever fished her lakes and streams cannot deny that Newfoundland has a special claim on them. There is no fishing in other places after one has been here. Wherever there is a bit of water (which is everywhere), there appear to be trout. It would never surprise me to see one jumping joyously in the mud puddle in our back yard. Almost within city limits, anglers may be seen posted at short intervals along streams or ponds, and all catching something. No wonder it is a country where everyone is a fisherman and even children know the trick of casting a fly.

Salmon may be counted as Newfoundland's own, for similar but even better reasons. No salmon anywhere can quite touch it in flavor. The fish are so plentiful that, if you have any skill with a rod at all, you will never be satisfied with landing one. But if you have no luck, you may have one offered at your door, just out of the water, for as little as seven cents a pound. Even the locally canned salmon is a treat, and no kin whatever to the variety we open when aunt Matilda arrives unexpectedly for a meal.

First the trout, then the salmon, and then the "fish" arrive (fish in this country meaning cod). Sometimes they are late or come in slowly, and everyone is anxious. The cod dominate this country as thoroughly as corn does the Mississippi Valley or wheat the Canadian prairies. When they do come, everyone knows it. Flakes up and down the coast are covered with them, split and salted, drying to be exported. Men climb the capital's ancient, rock-ribbed streets (so steep that in some places they are flights of steps) peddling them in barrows or pony-carts. One must be prepared to meet anywhere a greet, pop-eyed fish, carried by a hand under its gills, or to have it offered at the door for something like fifteen cents.

These are not the cod we eat, or refuse to eat, on the mainland. Something in the cold northern water gives them a special flavor and a firmer whiteness to the flesh. Haddock are not popular here. Herring are in a class with bait. Tuna are "horse-mackerel," and who would care to eat them? But everyone relishes fresh cod. Among the real delicacies of the country, fit for any banquet, are cod tongues. "Want to buy any tong's?" you are asked every day. They sell by the dozen for a song. Fried in butter, they can hold up their heads with oysters or scallops. A chef at a local hotel once entered them on the menu as "deep sea oysters" and they were instantly popular. Other titbits the cod supplies are "fish faces" (the flesh on the cheeks), sounds, and some part of his interior decorating scheme known, from the shape, as "breeches".

About the middle of June word is broadcast around the coast that "the caplin have struck in". Now here is something exclusively native. Unless you happen to be dropping in on Alaska or Greenland, you will have to come to Newfoundland or its adjacent Labrador territory for caplin. This is a small fish, much like a smelt. You are aware of it, as you are of the cod, before you actually set foot in the country. You get characteristic, not too re-assuring, whiffs of it off shore, where it is spread on the flakes. You see it trundled in barrows, smoked or dried brown, or piled in heaps in little shop windows.

It is one of the mainstays of Newfoundland diet. It "strikes in" in schools. Since it may take a playful notion to strike out again soon and not come back, the fishermen in the outports leave everything to make the most of the visit. There is a story of an Irish padre riding at night on a lonely road, when he saw making for him in the dim light four dark figures walking with labored steps, carrying on their shoulders what looked alarmingly like a coffin. Sweat broke out on the priest's forehead, but he stood his ground. When the group came nearer, it stopped and one man approached on the run, crying:

"Is it yourself, father? Sure we was afeared we'd missed ye. Ye see the poor craythur's dyin'. The caplin was strikin' in and we mightn't have time for to bury her. So we made a bit of a coffin and brought her to meet ye."

Close on the heels of the fish pedlars comes another small army offering greens—turnip tops and dandelions. Turnip tops are a national dish, replacing spinach. Dandelions are a ritual—a hand-me-down from not so distant days when green food was scarce and scurvy prevalent. They are so universally recognized as an institution that letters of protest appear in the papers because some land-owner has been so high-handed as to drive dandelion-pickers from his fields. The whole country seems ready to rise up and defend the right of the people to their spring tonic.

This is a land not only of fish but of berries. Its mountains (never dignified by any other name than hills or tolts) and its vast treeless barrens are covered with partridge-berries, squash-berries, blue-berries (called "whorts" or commonly, "'herts"), raspberries, strawberries, marshberries, the latter being an improved variety of the Cape Cod cranberry which is slightly *declass * here. The choicest preserve, kept for very special "company," is capillaire, made of the tiny white berries of the plant called maidenhair. But the ~~real~~ berry of the island is the bake-apple.

This is a sort of yellow bramble, found in some northern European countries and known as the cloud-berry. Here and in Labrador, where it grows so plentifully that the marshy land turns to gold, it has no name but bake-apple. It is shipped into St. John's in quantities from the outports and, when that season is over, from Labrador. It is made into a jam which tastes, if you are new to it, somewhat like gooseberry. When you grow to like it, as you do, it has a delectable flavor of honey. No good housewife will face a winter without jars of her own amber bake-apple jam in her cupboard, and factories do a big business canning the berries for local trade.

When all the canning and preserving are done, colder weather brings its own delicacies. The first is the partridge. This is something quite different, both in quality and in quantity, from partridge elsewhere. The miles of wilderness where anyone may wander and trespass to his heart's content make the country all a hunter could pray for. Partridge are as yet so abundant that they are served in hotels or country tea-rooms. They may, like almost everything else, be bought at your door in the city. They come on the table plump-breasted, dark and succulent, and melt in your mouth.

Later the wild duck, the tern and other "sea-birds," appear. Some have a rather fishy flavor, but all are tender and appetizing. The next event is the rabbit season.

The newcomer may turn up his nose when he first sees rabbits hanging in pairs outside shop windows. They look exactly like the Canadian bunny which has too strong a flavor. This meat when cooked is dark too, but delicious, and more like the English rabbits or even chicken. The common explanation is a difference in feeding habits. Possibly the Newfoundland bunny, with so much open ground to range, leaves spruce buds out of his diet. Rabbit *en casserole* or plain rabbit stew is a dish welcomed here on any table. It is the poor man's meat all winter because, even in the city, it costs so little. Canned rabbit is in demand when the fresh is out of season.

The real backbone of the Newfoundlander's diet the year round is, of course, salt cod. Boiled salt fish with crisply fried fatback (fat pork) and fish cakes are every-day victuals around the coast. But the truly native dish, enjoyed everywhere, is fish and brewis. This is a combination of salt fish and "hard-bread" (hard tack) which has been soaked over night and then boiled, with a little fat pork or butter for seasoning. It tastes much better than it sounds. It seems to be a tradition as a Sunday morning

breakfast. Hard-bread is, by the way, another specialty. Excursion biscuit is a sweetened variety, made in thick solid blocks. Both are surprisingly edible.

It is a form of initiation into this endearing little country to sample its native foods.

"Have you eaten our rabbits?" you are asked with proper pride. "Have you tried our bake-apples? Have you had brewis yet?"

If you can say you have enjoyed them all, you have passed the novice stage. There is such an enthusiasm for all the special dishes—as for everything typically Newfoundland—that it is hard to avoid sharing it. But the really acid test is: "Do you like flippers?" That settles the question as to your being qualified to enter the intimate family circle.

The flipper, in case you are ignorant, is the forepaw or forefin of the seal. When the first of the sealers comes home with her catch, sounding her siren triumphantly as she enters the Narrows, all St. John's is joyful. It is an ancient custom to rejoice over the return of the sealers from an exceedingly perilous adventure in which most of the country was at one time, in some way, involved. Part of the excitement now may come from the knowledge that the first flippers of the season will soon appear on the streets. Peddled, unwrapped, from house to house, they look about as appetizing as a sheep's brains or any by-product of the slaughter-house. But wait till they come on the table.

I was warned that no tyro should attempt to cook flippers (not that I was contemplating it). They must be cleaned very carefully and every particle of blubber removed, or they will have an oily taste. Properly done they are a triumph, combining the savory flavor of meat with the tenderness of fish. The whole seal is edible, not unlike swordfish, but the flippers are the choice morsel.

They are to be enjoyed only in the outports when the drift-ice happens to come in close to land, bringing seals on it. But in the capital, which is the home port of the largest sealing-fleet in the world, flippers are a long-cherished tradition. As soon as the first ship docks, an eruption of flipper suppers breaks out, given by the various societies of the city. They are an honorable institution, all well patronized, especially by the men. There is inevitably a long toast list, for the rite of eating flippers seems to be inseparably connected with speech-making.

It may not belong in the food category, but the national beverage of Newfoundland cannot be omitted—spruce beer. The earliest settlers made this from a recipe that calls for spruce buds, molasses

and yeast. It is still popular, and can be bought at almost every store on any side street.

Homesickness is a malady identified closely with taste as well as smells and sounds. Whenever anyone ponders on some loved-and-lost land, he invariably remembers food. I have seen exiled middle-westerners eating their hearts out for roasting-ears, or dill pickles; Vermonters for maple syrup, Maine's children for quahaug soup. I once tracked down a tiny restaurant on the Left Bank in Paris that advertised American food, and cheerfully ate canned baked beans and biscuits (bisquet) that turned out to be minute, brick-like pellets and, of course, cold. Now I can picture myself when I come to leave Newfoundland, tramping up and down monotonous streets that have no sign of an odor of fish, wistfully imploring bewildered shop-keepers to sell me some bake-apples or flipper, or, in the name of goodness, just a few dried caplin.