



Food is one of the most important aspects of culture, which allows us to express and transform the products of nature and incorporate them into our body. Massimo Montanari, in his book *Food and Culture*, says, “Food is configured as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most efficient instruments for communication.”

In this article, I would like to talk about a Chilean dish by the name of Caldillo de Congrio, which is so significant and profoundly rooted in the Chilean culture that Pablo Neruda (poet and Nobel Prize winner) wrote his famous “Ode to the Caldillo de Congrio.”

Chilean gastronomy, like the majority of Latin-American gastronomies, is the product and combination of traditional indigenous cuisine with the contribution and introduction of Spanish customs, food and traditions. There are countries in which the traditions of indigenous cuisine predominate in the way people eat, which could be in the case of Guatemala, where the Mayan presence is still very strong. In the case of Chile, it is a Spanish and indigenous combination with lesser influences of the Italian and German immigrants, as well as a marked French influence.

The Caldillo of Congrio is a Chilean dish with a fish base. Congrio is a type of fish in Chile that can be found in colors such as gold, red or black.

This is a very popular dish, and it's appreciated on a national level. It is one

of the dishes that President Michelle Bachelet offered to the Prince of Wales on his visit to Chile in March of 2009.

The Communist party of Chile has the tradition of serving Caldillo de Congrio to the press in an annual event during which important announcements are made for the following year. This tradition has been repeated for the past two decades. The Chilean poet and Nobel Prize winner in literature wrote an “Ode to the Caldillo de Congrio,” which says the following:

“Ode to Conger Chowder”
(translated by Margaret Sayers Peden)

In the storm-tossed
Chilean
sea
lives the rosy conger,
giant eel
of snowy flesh.
And in Chilean
stewpots,
along the coast,
was born the chowder,
thick and succulent,
a boon to man.
You bring the Conger, skinned,
to the kitchen
(its mottled skin slips off
like a glove,
leaving the
grape of the sea
exposed to the world),
naked,
the tender eel

glistens,
prepared
to serve our appetites.
Now
you take
garlic,
first, caress
that precious
ivory,
smell
its irate fragrance,
then
blend the minced garlic
with onion
and tomato
until the onion
is the color of gold.
Meanwhile
steam
our regal
ocean prawns,
and when
they are
tender,
when the savor is
set in a sauce
combining the liquors
of the ocean
and the clear water
released from the light of the onion,
then
you add the eel
that it may be immersed in glory,
that it may steep in the oils
of the pot,
shrink and be saturated.
Now all that remains is to
drop a dollop of cream

into the concoction,
a heavy rose,
then slowly
deliver
the treasure to the flame,
until in the chowder
are warmed
the essences of Chile,
and to the table
come, newly wed
the savors
of land and sea,
that in this dish
you may know heaven.

Ingredients (serves 6 people)

Four pounds of Abadejo or Congrio Dorado (in Spanish), Kingclip or cuskeel (in English), cut in pieces. Save the bones and head to make the fish base.

- 5 potatoes, peeled and cut into thick slices
- 2 diced onions
- 4 cloves of minced garlic
- 1 can of tomatoes
- 3 stalks of celery
- 5 stems of parsley
- 3 bay leaves
- 2 cups of fish base
- 3 tbsp. of oil
- 5 tbsp. of liquid cream
- Freshly chopped cilantro
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preparation

In a pot, fry the garlic and onion. Add the can of diced tomato with all the juice, and cook during 6 or 7 minutes.

Add the potatoes to this mix, along with the vegetables (celery, parsley and bay leaves), the fish base, salt and pepper. Cook until the potatoes are cooked. Add the fish at the end and do not allow it to overcook. Check the seasoning.

To serve, put the pieces of fish, potatoes and onion in soup dishes and pour the fish base on top. Serve the liquid cream over the fish and sprinkle with chopped cilantro.

Fish Base

Put the fish bones and head in a pot of cold water, without the fins or eyes. Boil for 20 minutes on a low flame. ♦