



Howard Hillman's Great Peasant Dishes of the world

This printout is from the peasant cuisine section of my website ▷

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Vatapa

Brazil

It originated as a peasant dish. Today, it is a popular national specialty.

Pronunciation:

vah-tah-pah'

Part 1 Recipe

■ Ingredients

Servings: 4

- **Dried shrimp**
100 grams or 1/4 pound
- **Halibut**
Or other firm-fleshed, non-oily fish.
700 grams or 1 1/2 pounds
- **Coconut milk**
5 deciliters or 2 cups
- **Dende (palm nut) oil**
30 milliliters or 2 tablespoons
- **Chopped onions**
12 centiliters or 1/2 cup
- **Minced garlic**
15 milliliters or 1 tablespoon
- **Water**
5 deciliters or 2 cups
- **Bay leaf**
1 medium sized
- **Fresh chili peppers**
Fresh.
6 centiliters or 1/4 cup
- **Salt**
5 milliliters or 1 teaspoon
- **Peanuts**
Freshly ground unsalted, shelled, skinned and roasted.
8 centiliters or 1/3 cup
- **Fine-grained cornmeal**
6 centiliters or 1/4 cup

■ Steps

- 1** Chop the shrimp in a food processor or electric blender.
- 2** Bone and skin the fish. Discard the skin. Reserve the bones for step 3. Cut the fish into 2 1/2 centimeter (1 inch) cubes and reserve them for step 8.
- 3** Add the shrimp, coconut milk, and fish bones to a thick-bottomed 1 1/2 to 2 liter (1 1/2 to 2 quart) saucepan. Bring the mixture to a simmer, stirring occasionally. Simmer the mixture for 30 minutes, stirring now and then.
- 4** Heat the oil in a thick-bottomed 2 to 3 liter (1 to 3 quart) saucepan over low to moderate heat. Sauté the onions for 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the garlic and sauté this mixture for 1 minute, stirring constantly.
- 5** Stir 4 deciliters (1 3/4 cups) of the water into the onion-garlic mixture. Stir in the bay leaf, chili peppers, salt, and peanuts. Bring the mixture to a simmer and cook it for 10 minutes.
- 6** Discard the bay leaf from the onion-garlic preparation. Strain into this preparation the shrimp coconut mixture. Simmer the combination for 5 minutes.
- 7** Soak the cornmeal in the remaining 6 centiliters or 1/4 cup water for 5 minutes. Slowly stir the moist cornmeal into the pot. Simmer the mixture for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

- 8** Add the fish cubes to the pot. Thoroughly submerge them and gently cook the preparation over low heat for 5 to 7 minutes, stirring occasionally and very gently. Serve the vatapa immediately.

Part 2 Cooking tips

■ Pointers

- **If palm nut oil is unavailable** - Use olive oil. Also substitute 12 centiliters (1/2 cup) pureed tomatoes for the 6 centiliters (1/4) cup of the water in step 7 - this gives the dish some of its characteristic reddish hue that would otherwise have been imparted by the palm nut oil.
- **When handling chili peppers** - Do not touch your eyes. Thoroughly wash the knife blade, your hands, and the work surface when you complete the cutting task.
- **Chili hotness** - Adjust the quantity of chili according to your degree of built-up immunity to that spice but, remember, vatapa is supposed to be hot.
- **Halibut substitutes** - They include cod and striped sea bass.
- **Coconut milk** - Do not let it boil for even a second throughout the recipe.

■ Serving suggestions

- **Thickening** - Ladle your vatapa into shallow soup bowls. By the time the preparation is cooked, it will have the consistency of a thin porridge.

- **Traditional**

accompaniments - Serve vatapa with pirao de arroz com leite de coco, a cold pudding made with rice flour and coconut milk. Plain rice served steaming hot is also popular. Cold beer is the preferred alcoholic beverage for vatapa.

■ Variations

- **Shrimp** - Add some shelled and deveined fresh shrimp to the recipe 1 or 2 minutes after you add the fish in step 8.

- **Tomatoes** - Use them whether or not you use palm nut oil.

- **Nuts** - Substitute almonds or cashew nuts for the peanuts. Brazil nuts can be used, too.

- **Extra ingredients** -

Experiment by adding ginger and other flavoring agents. Diced sweet green peppers lend color contrast.

- **Cornmeal** - In place of it, use manioc, rice flour, cornstarch, or bread crumbs to thicken the dish.

- **Meat substitution** - Use pork or chicken as the main ingredient.

eventually it became the dominant population group. The mulattos of Brazil are people of three continents - the blood of black slaves, white settlers, and native Indians runs in their veins.

More than blood blended. An amalgamated cuisine developed, borrowing from the culinary styles and ingredients of West Africa, Europe, and South America. A dish that is typical of this melting-pot cuisine is the Bahian specialty called vatapa, a hot and spicy stew cooked with dende (palm nut) oil and coconut milk. The main ingredient can be seafood or meat.

I enjoyed a vatapa made of dried shrimp and fresh fish in a fisherman's palm-sheltered hut along Bahia's beautiful coastline. Like most Bahians, my host and his family were quick to smile and went out of their way to make strangers feel at ease and welcomed. But the grandmother of the house made the most delightful impression on me - she prepared the vatapa that would please almost any guest, as this recipe will verify.

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Part 3

Travelog

Soon after the Portuguese navigator Cabral claimed Brazil in 1500, slaves from Africa were being imported in great numbers to Bahia, in northeastern Brazil, to work the sugar cane plantations. Over the years a racial mixture called mulatto began to emerge, and