

Fish in the Metis Diet and Culture¹

Burbot, Mariah, Freshwater Cod: The Burbot (*Lota lota*), usually called a Mariah in Manitoba, is considered to be a delicacy by many Metis. Most Metis mothers would use the oil from its liver as a preventive medicine as one would use store-bought cod liver oil. Many Metis remember being doctored by Granny in the late fall and throughout the winter with cod liver oil, usually one tablespoon every Friday morning. It was customary to give Metis children a big feed of Mariah before the onset of winter. The Mariah is part of the cod family. It is considered a delicacy in Scandinavia as well. Because of its homely appearance and coloring in shades of brown on black, many in mainstream society deride the Mariah as a trash fish. Its oil is said to rival that of the saltwater cod. A favourite Metis dish was to fry the livers and eat as a spread on bannock. Some Metis used the skins of the Mariah for making moccasins.

Fish Liquor, Fish Milk or “Bouyon”: Fish milk was a broth made from fish, usually mullets or silver bass. This is very nutritious and was used by the Metis for feeding infants. This was good for infants given the fact that Aboriginal people have difficulty digesting dairy products. This broth was made by boiling cubed or sliced fish with fresh greens, carrots, onions, potatoes, water and a little milk. The broth was then taken off and fed to babies. Another broth used for children who were lactose intolerant was “deer juice,” a broth made from the juices from cooking deer meat.

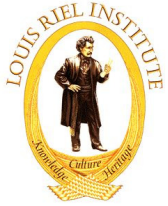
Smoked Fish: Smokehouses are usually built of scrap lumber and measure about four by five feet on the sides and five feet in height. Often the smokehouse is lined on the outside with cardboard. Inside shelves are made either with chicken wire nailed to the sidewalls or with three-quarter inch round peeled sticks placed across to form racks. Smoked goldeye from the Winnipeg River are a delicacy known the world over. The Metis also smoke tullibee, white fish and mullet or suckers. Whereas goldeye are gutted and the fish is smoked whole, suckers are smoked with their heads cut off, backbone removed and the two fillets left attached to the belly. This makes a square piece, which is then laid out on the chicken wire for smoking. A fire is made in the cut-off end of an oil barrel or an old washtub placed on the floor. A slow burning fire is made, usually from oak wood. The fish are turned regularly and it usually takes a full day to smoke them.

Sucker Balls: Sucker balls are made with sucker fish caught when they are running in the spring. Sucker balls are prepared by grinding up the fillets, adding onions, breadcrumbs and egg for binding then rolling into balls. When cooking, the balls are actually flattened into patties. Sometimes mashed potatoes are used to replace breadcrumbs.

Sucker Heads: Sucker heads (boiled) are considered to be a delicacy by Metis people. In the spring it is said to be a contest between the Metis and the bears to obtain these. When

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the suckers start running in the spring, both bears and Metis gather at the streams to catch suckers. The bear scoops the suckers out of the stream with his paw. He is very accurate and always lands them in the same place in a neat pile. He then proceeds to eat all the heads off the suckers. He leaves the carcasses for the ravens to have a little feed and will return later to eat the fish bodies.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute