

MOTHER IN LAW'S TARAMASALATA

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They say that Melbourne has the second largest Greek population outside of Athens. When I started to cook professionally in the 1970s 'going to the Greeks' was one of the best dining options in that city. The atmosphere at these Tavernas was vibrant and welcoming, they cooked over real charcoal, and they were suited to our meagre student budgets. Most menus started with the 'Dips'—*Tarama*, *Tzatziki*, and *Eggplant Dip*, a form of *Babaganoushe*. Lonsdale street in the city had a very old Greek food enclave that had a number of good Greek delis and it was from one of these that I got the recipe for this delicious version of *Taramasalata*.

It took many years for the owner to divulge the recipe to me. She explained that before a traditional Greek marriage, when the groom's parents met the bride's family to discuss the arrangements, this version of *Taramasalata* was served in order to display the generosity and means of the family.

The secret lies in two things. Firstly, it has none of the soaked bread or potato of more common ones—only the good oil. Olive oil was always a special luxury in the village. Secondly you add a little cold water at the end, which counterintuitively lightens and aerates the emulsion.

Taramasalata is essentially fish egg mayonnaise and, in this case, salted fish eggs. It can be made with cod's roe, grey mullet roe, trevally, salmon roe—in fact any roe, even caviar.

The traditional Greek versions use all olive oil and don't use any garlic,

but suit yourself. I like it with half extra virgin olive oil and half good vegetable oil. I have even made a fancy pants version with cold smoked salmon roe with whole cold smoked salmon eggs folded through the mix at the end.

There is a vast culinary history behind the preservation of fish eggs. Probably the best known is *Bottarga*, in which the whole egg sac is preserved intact. Although expensive to buy, it can also be made at home. This year I used Trevally roe for making *Bottarga* using the whole intact egg sacs. Often however, when the sacs are removed from the fish, the fine external membrane is broken and this is what I use for making *tarama*.

Bottarga

Soak the intact roe in 10% brine for 24 hours, then dry and lightly salt with a good sea salt and press for 3 days. Then lightly wash and dry the salted roe, brush with olive oil and hang to dry, with a fan underneath, for about 2 weeks—or longer if you like them really hard.



Bottarga drying in the foreground - home made Capocollo¹ at rear.

¹ Capocollo—more commonly 'Coppa' in New Zealand—is a dry-cured pork salume made from a muscle running between the pig's neck and fifth rib. From 'Capo'—head, and 'collo'—neck).

The *Bottarga* is best made and dried in a cool (under 25 degree C) environment. It keeps best well-wrapped in the fridge. I vacuum pack, and it lasts indefinitely; otherwise it can dry out too much for my taste. I like to slice it thinly, but its also OK to grate it, if its hard. Best to use soon after grating as it can quickly lose its vibrancy.



A bowl of Tarama, surrounded by home-made Bottarga.

Tarama

If the egg sacs are torn, scrape out the eggs and carefully mix with 3% of their weight in a good sea salt. Press for 3 days in a fine sieve and it's ready to use as the base for *taramasalata*. Like *Bottarga*, *Tarama* also keeps very well vacuum packed in the fridge.

Taramasalata

20g	Salted grey mullet or cod's roe (<i>Tarama</i>)
20g	Lemon juice
20g	Onion
300ml	Extra virgin olive oil
300ml	Fine Vegetable oil
A touch	Water

Blend the fish eggs and the onion in a food processor using the metal blade. Add the lemon juice and slowly add the olive oil, just as you would for any

mayonnaise. Slowly add the vegetable oil. It will get very thick. Have a close look and when you can no longer see any whole eggs it will have taken as much oil as it can without 'breaking.' If it separates, start again with a little more roe. The mixture at this stage should be so thick that you can invert the bowl without it dropping out. Now add a little cold water and the texture will change from thick and oily to a light, almost moussey lusciousness.²



² Before flying to New Zealand, I realised that I could not bring over my own, home-made, salted roe (*Tarama*) due to quarantine restrictions. I made lots of inquiries to see if I could get some in Auckland when I landed, without success, but Australian quarantine assured me that if the *tarama* was in a commercial tin, correctly labelled, it would pass customs.