

Foodie's Guide to Regional Gastronomy: Kale Soup or Caldo Verde or Caldo Gallego or Minestra Maritata

Series Introduction (Move down if you're familiar with the thread or don't care)

In this series, we hope to highlight and showcase in as interesting a way as possible, the stories behind our favorite, mouth-watering local dishes. While we'll focus on greater New Bedford and the South Coast, we will occasionally "travel" to places like Plymouth, Providence or even Boston. I will attempt to keep it light-hearted, fun and easy to read. While I can't promise to keep you compelled and pull you along with prose – that would take a professional writer – I will promise to be liberal with the drool-inducing images of these dishes.

As always, feedback is encouraged. Anecdotes are wanted. Discussion is paramount. **Please** join in!

Oh, the ways we love you kale soup. You warm our bones on a cold day, bring us back to our childhood and fond memories with our *avós*, and feed our souls. I don't know about you but just seeing or hearing the words evokes the aroma!

My landlady is from the "old country" and when I come home and walk into my apartment and get whiff of kale soup that was evidently simmering on her stove for hours it shifts my assemblage point. It pushes the worries and stresses of the day away from my mind, the tension in my shoulders loosen, and

I get happy.



Of course, I'm hoping that she will hear me come home and soon I will hear a knock on the door and she'll offer me a generous bowl of soup. One thing you can rely on with those from the "old country" is that when it comes to homecooked food they are always generous, so that knock always comes – but just in case she doesn't hear me I'll be extra heavy with my footfalls, maybe "accidentally" bump my elbow into the stairwell's wall.

While I didn't grow up with the aroma of kale soup cooking in the house, I had many friends that were Portuguese and the idea of their generosity came from the fact that those Portuguese friends consistently brought me batches of it when their *avó* or *mãe* made some. Why didn't the *avô* or *papai* ever make some?

While considered to be Portugal's national dish, Kale Soup, *Caldo Verde* (meaning "green broth") or Portuguese Sausage Kale Soup for you non-Portagees, there is little history about its origins. When this is the case for something historical – whether an invention, discovery or creation of a dish – it typically means the origins are from another nation and that

would ruin any claims. For example, ask someone where Baklava or Falafel came from and a half dozen nations will raise their hands, all claiming to be the originator and all claiming to make the best, most delectable version.

First of the problems is that the soup, or at least most of its primary ingredients coming together in one place, are also found in Italy and Spain. I'd imagine that Brazil has a version, but I know very little about Brazilian cuisine. This is because the core of the soup is linked to farmers and the ingredients were readily available or inexpensive. One could say it's a quintessential "poor man's soup" comprised of ingredients that cost little but filled the belly for a day's work and for most of that day. In my book, "poor man's" anything is a code word for mouth-watering and delicious.

Italy has many regional variations from the "old country" all the way to Italian-American neighborhood: *Minestra Maritata* or Italian Wedding Soup. The "married" bit is a reference to the mingling together of greens – *torzella* or kale, escarole, broccoli rabe, endives, chicory or even lettuce – with meat, which can be Italian sausage, *guanciale*, pork ribs, ham hocks or meatballs. Of course, these are accompanied with pasta (*ditali* or any of the *pastina* is best) or potatoes for starch, cannellini (white) or kidney beans, carrots, and red pepper flakes swimming in a rich broth.



Forget the bread to sop up and get hurt, buddy.

Spain has its version in *Caldo Gallego*. This version is different in that they are heavy on the amount of beans, in this case, white beans. The last difference is a slight one in that is the selection of meat: *chorizo* as opposed to *linguiça* or *chouriço*. Otherwise, *caldo gallego* is the same as kale soup, and does not have the astounding variety that you'll find in the Italian version. Don't believe me about these two "imposters" or "wannabe" kale soups? Only one image in this article is of kale soup and the other two are of *Minestra Maritata* and *Caldo Gallego*.

The Portuguese standard has room for variety, at least here on the SouthCoast. The only wiggle room that I have encountered is whether there is pasta or not and the pasta is inevitably elbow macaroni. Now, I haven't the faintest idea if this ties into differences among the island, e.g. Azores, St. Michael, Madeira, just a variety from household to household, or is specific to the Portugues here in the New World. You would know better than me.

One thing I do know is that there is quite the debate about

whether the elbow macaroni belongs and whether *linguiça*, *chourico*, ham hock, or even *paio* should be used for the meat. In fact, I can picture the *avós* fistfighting about what real kale soup is and what the ingredients are supposed to be. The only thing I can think everyone agrees on is that it must be served with some Portuguese bread, preferably a *Papo Secos* or *pao* or as the *gringoosh* say, a “pop.”

This is apparently a “thing” in greater New Bedford. We all have our favorite restaurant or two, but if you **ever** say your restaurant is best or *gasp* authentic be prepared for flushed faces, loud voices and declarations like “That place doesn’t serve genuine Portuguese food, just fake dishes for Americans!” Is there a Portuguese equivalent for *gringo*? Pronounced “gringoosh” I’d imagine? If so, I’d imagine that is bantered about too.

The reality is that I haven’t come across a bad Portuguese restaurant and maybe I am disqualified to judge because I’m a *gringoosh*, I don’t know. Does *authentic* or closest to the “real thing” really matter? What is the real thing? Can anyone say “I have this recipe I found from 1452 that states ‘My name is Manuel Gomes Fernandes Pereira Ferreira Da Silva Silva and I invented kale soup! Here’s the recipe.’”?



Again, does it really matter? Would you turn down anyone's kale soup, *Minestra Maritata* or *Caldo Gallego*. "This aroma has my belly growling, my mouth watering and looks sensational but sir, I am affronted by your use of Italian and Spanish words so I must refuse!!!" said no one ever.

When I hear the words Kale Soup it conjures up childhood memories of curling around a hot bowl on a winter day after snow fights, sledding, and building snowmen. My Portuguese friends will mention the history and family members that trace back to Portugal for generations and the various family members that make a "mean" bowl.

At the end of the day, it's about what the bowl of soup does for you, what it means, how it makes you feel, the memories involved and how it brings together family and friends and unites people regardless of their gender, nationality, ethnicity, skin color, political affiliation or any other petty nonsense. That's what food does. I believe it was Samuel Clemens that said: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts."

Maybe that's the key to world peace and the end of all this toxic political disagreement that now characterizes America today? What if we had some 80-year old avó from a tenement in Fall River or New Bedford who has been making kale soup for 65 years, force everyone to sit down a hot, fresh bowl of "happy" from the "old country" before they got to talking?

I bet you it would put a smile on all the *gringoosh's* faces and they would all lighten up.

Who makes the best kale soup in your house? Do you know of a restaurant that is as good as your avó makes it? Have a recipe to share?

If you enjoyed this type of article and are foodie who wants more you can read the other ones in the series here.